

D R A F T

Comments and criticisms welcome.

DO WE REALLY UNDERSTAND GREEK RELIGION?

In fact, *Is There Such a Thing as “Greek Religion”?*

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Was there such a thing as ancient Greek religion? Surely there was; the great scholar Walter Burkert wrote a book with that title; the learned Marin Nilsson wrote its history; countless researchers have explored its beliefs and practices. Its study has become elevated into an intercultural inquiry into “comparative religions.”

All this is greatly to be admired, but something is missing among the Greeks – a word for “religion.” How did they get along without this convenient bushel basket into which we dump so much? Perhaps it is clear that lead plates with curses can be grouped with aristocratic women weaving an elegant robe, or a politician orating over war dead with an athlete running naked, or satyrs prancing about the stage with theological arguments that never quite get resolved.

We need some conceptual framework in which to understand these aspects of ancient Greek society. If they would not oblige us by creating such a term, then what can we do except steal one from the Romans, religio, even if it too is highly problematic. And while we are at it, buy in to the assumption, a bold one to be sure, that all these “varieties of religious experience” belong together, if not by sharing a common denominator, then surely some ‘family resemblance,’ in Wittgenstein’s sense of the term?

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Surely the Greeks had some concept of the “sacred.” All cultures do, it seems. Precisely! The Greeks provide the student of their “religion” with an embarrassment of sacreds, a least four of them, hagios, hagnos, hieros, and hosios. They constitute a remarkable rich semantic field, one with far greater nuance than the bushel basket word, “sacred,” on which we rely.

There remains, moreover, the boundary problem. Where does “religion” stop and ordinary life begin? Is the sexual drive and its consummation, for example, outside the realm or “religion”? The vocabulary suggests otherwise, Eros, venerated in poetry and in cult, for the sexual drive;

ta aphrodisia for all the forms of sexual activity. And never far off or easily pleased, as Hippolytus found out, Aphrodite herself.

How many other aspects, then, of day-to-day life should be classified as “religion”? If Eros is included, what about his associates, Himeros and Pothos, Desire and Yearning? And what of Peitho, Persuasion, active in erotic and many other settings? What of war, the manifestation of Ares, or Peace, personified and venerated as Eirene? Where does “religion” begin and “real life” end?

What of happiness, eudaimonia? Its etymology suggests that one’s daimon, if in a good mood, can bring about this result. The Greeks did not make prayers or offerings to their individual daimones, as best we can tell, but even Aristotle concedes that divine figures might have power over personal happiness or well-being. At the beginning of his Eudemian Ethics he considers how living well *might be “acquired”* (*kteton 1214 a 15 ff.*) *Is it the result of some natural endowment (physis), or study (mathesis), or training (askesis), or something else:*

Or does it happen in none of these ways but in one of two other ways, either, as in the case of persons taken by the nymphs or a god, by inspiration from some superhuman source, like those inspired by a god, or through tyche (luck / fortune), for many people say that eudaimonia and eutuchia are the same thing).

Aristotle Eudemian Ethics 1216 a 23 ff, trans. Rackham, modified .

If well-being may be the gift of a divinity, does “religion” turn out to be co-extensive for the ancient Greeks with ordinary life?

That question points to the need for a concept of the profane or the secular. Surely Greek society (not just individual philosophers and thinkers) had such a concept. All cultures do, don’t they?

All known religious beliefs, whether simple or complex, present one common characteristic: they presuppose a classification of things, real and ideal, of which men think, into two classes or opposed groups, generally designated by two distinct terms which are translated well enough by the words profane and sacred. This division of the world into two domains, the one containing all that is sacred, the other all that is profane, is the distinctive trait of religious thought.

E. Durkheim Elementary Forms of Religious Life, trans. J.W. Swain, second edition (London 1976) p. 37

But once again Greek terminology does not live up to modern expectations. There is, to be sure, terminology to mark the distinction between space that may be trodden upon, bebēlon, and that which is forbidden to ordinary feet, but this distinction between sacred and non-sacred space seems never to have been generalized into a concept of “the secular.” There is also a distinction between festival time moments that interrupt the daily routine, and “the day after,”

sometimes a euphemism for a hangover. But this distinction seems to have had limited interpretive range.

The absence of a clear conception of the secular may not be a great deficiency, since the modern concept is itself ambiguous, implying either the neutrality of state among competing faiths, or the avoidance of faith in any form whatsoever. Still, if the Greek language provides no good way to speak of the secular, must we invent the needed terminology and impose it, just as we have done with “religion?” Before doing so, it would be good to ask what inhibited the development of such terminology in a language as rich and adaptable as ancient Greek? Perhaps its speakers did not perceive a need for such terminology, or even felt that it would misrepresent life as they experienced it. By that, I mean the habit of thought that recognized the apparent permeability of every-day life by the sudden appearance of what seemed divine. The secular erects an unscalable wall between “real life,” and the ostensible divine. But many ancient Greeks seem fascinated with the idea that ordinary life might suddenly, unexpectedly, be interrupted by or infused with something divine, for better or worse. A rigorous concept of the secular would block such recognition.

That in turn might leave one vulnerable when the unexpected, and unexplainable hit. How could one make sense of the feelings of shock and surprise, of amazement and awe? One might even experience ekplēxis, the knock-out blow that the unanticipated can deliver to the unsuspecting. If the secular barrier is high enough, there is no cognitive defense against such feelings.

This is, to be sure, hypothesis, but it invites us to explore the possibility that life might at any moment prove permeable by the sacred in any of its varying forms. Since such a mode of thought carries with it intense emotions, there is need to investigate more fully the role of the emotions.

Such an examination is, admittedly, a daunting challenge. “Emotion” is itself another “bushel basket” word, by no means identical with either of the two Greek terms, pathos and kinesis, often translated by that word. Some aspects of the emotional life of the ancient Greeks, however, are clearly linked to what we call “religion.” One example is sebas, *awe* or *reverence*. Others, however, seem not to be distinctively religious but sometimes to be infused with a sense of something divine. *Thaum*, *wonder*, for instance, is sometimes simple amazement, but can evoke feeling of the involvement of a god. The same is true, I believe, of thalia, *abundance* / *good cheer*, *epainos*, *praise*, and perhaps *joy* (*chara*) and *feelings of reciprocity* (*charis*). Not to be overlooked are the three terms with pagan ancestry appropriated by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 13.13 and converted into a Christian triad: *trust* (pistis), *confidence* (*elpis*), and *compassion* (agape).

And not far away stands the well carved Phrasikelia with pomegranate in hand and on a marble slab with a small human taken in hand by large, dancing nymphs. (The photo is copyright but you can look at it [here](#).) They remind us that we cannot exclude the scenes and gestures in the visual arts from the study of emotion and religion among the Greeks.

Trying to distinguish purely “sacred” from “secular” emotions may not be a productive interpretive strategy, since religion among the Greeks. What we call “religion” has a way of penetrating into almost every aspect of ancient life. After all, without that carefully constructed, impermeable barrier of the secular all life is potentially permeable by the sacred in one form or another.

The role of the emotions in the study of ancient Greek religion is perhaps the most telling implication of what might otherwise seem terminological quibbles. It points the student of Greek religion toward what is now being called “the emotional turn” in humanistic scholarship. The emotions associated with religious experience - awe, reverence, wonder, surprise, astonishment, and sometimes ekstasis and ekplēxis - have not always received the attention they deserve. Perhaps it is now time for ‘the emotional turn.’

One final word about surprise and astonishment. While sometimes neglected in traditional scholarship on Greek religion, the ancient Greeks themselves seem intensely aware of the power of the unexpected to break into ordinary life and disrupt it at its core, and to do that suddenly, in a day or even a split second. The turning of prosperity to disaster, the upsetting of social hierarchies and order, the challenging of certainties of every sort shape many of the Greek tragic dramas. So I end this provocation as Euripides often ended his dramas, with a nod to the unexpected:

*Many are the forms of what is unknown.
Much that the gods achieve is surprise.
What we look for does not come to pass;
God finds a way for what none foresaw.
Such was the end of this story.*

The final lines of the Alcestis and several Euripidean tragedies,
trans. Richmond Lattimore.

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Some Reading:

Jan Bremmer “‘Religion,’ ‘Ritual’” in Fritz Graf, ed., Ansichten griechischer Rituale (Stuttgart and Leipzig, Teubner, 1998).

Walter Burkert, Greek Religion, trans. John Raffan (Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press 1985).

W.R. Connor “‘Sacred’ and ‘Secular’: Hiera and hosia and the Classical Athenian Concept of the State” Ancient Society (1987) pp 161 -- 188.

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