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Olympus, Athens, and Jerusalem

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Olympus, Athens, and Jerusalem

Cover Page Footnote

This article is based on a lecture delivered at the The Greeks Institute, a series of lectures presented to secondary school teachers in the Bridgeport Public Schools during the spring of 1989. Co-sponsored by the Connecticut Humanities Council, Sacred Heart University, and the Bridgeport Public Schools, the purpose of the institute has been to provide teachers with an interdisciplinary exploration of classical Greece for the purposes of professional enrichment and curriculum development.

RICHARD GRIGG

Olympus, Athens, and Jerusalem

Great God! I'd rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathéd horn.

— Wordsworth, "The World is Too Much with Us"

As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods;
They kill us for their sport.

— Shakespeare, *King Lear*

The religion of the Greeks was an integral part of ancient Greek civilization. Nearly all of the activities of Greek life were carried out in the shadow of Mt. Olympus. Yet, despite the many legacies of Greece to later Western culture, Greek religion did not survive beyond the first few centuries of the Common Era (C.E.). Traditional Greek religion was weakened by the Greeks themselves, when the philosophers forced the gods out of the sanctuary of Homeric poetry and into the arena of abstract rational discourse. The final blow was inflicted by Christianity, which eventually became the official religion of the Roman Empire.

But the Greeks managed to have their say despite all of this, for the same Greek philosophy that undermined the gods had a profound impact on the Judeo-Christian tradition, which has formed the religious sensibilities of the West. Thus, our exploration of the role of the Greeks in the history of Western religion will take us from Olympus, to the Athens of Plato's Academy, and then to Jerusalem: we shall begin with the Greeks' own religion, then move to a brief analysis of how Greek philosophy affected that religion,

RICHARD GRIGG

17

and conclude with a look at the impact of Greek philosophy on Judeo-Christian notions of the divine and the human.

When one thinks of the religion of the Greeks, one thinks of mythology. The stories about the gods recounted by Hesiod and Homer have proved perennially fascinating, and there is no shortage of modern reference books that outline the activities of the gods from Apollo to Zeus. But Greek religion is not reducible to Greek mythology. While it used to be assumed that myth was the seed of a religion like that of the Greeks, with ritual and other religious acts growing out of mythic belief, much recent speculation has argued just the reverse: the myths about the gods sprang from the repetition of various rituals. Some scholars have gone even farther in downplaying myth's importance, regarding it as "a more or less gratuitous fantasy of the poets . . . only remotely related to the inner convictions of the believer, who was engaged in the concrete practice of cult ceremonies and in a series of daily acts that brought him into direct contact with the sacred and made him a pious man."¹ A more balanced assessment leads to the conclusion that myth was one of several important components of Greek piety. An understanding of Greek religion involves a grasp not of any one of those components in isolation, but of the whole that emerges from their combination. The myths of gods and heroes must be integrated into the larger Greek religious life.

The best way to get at Greek religion as a whole is by starting with a general theoretical perspective on the role of religion in society. The individual components of Greek belief and practice can subsequently be examined and unified from that vantage point. Many different theoretical perspectives have been suggested by students of religion, and all of them have limitations. All are simply proposals; none are indubitable truths. Nor are any of them empirical hypotheses that can be tested in some laboratory. Furthermore, each theory is bound to leave much out, to miss the richness of the religious phenomenon and thus to entail at least a degree of reductionism. As long as such limitations are kept in view, however, general theoretical perspectives prove invaluable guides for exploring religion.

Let us say, then, that a religion is a "way of worldmaking."² Modern thinkers have frequently observed that one of the things that distinguishes human beings from the rest of the animal kingdom is

18 SACRED HEART UNIVERSITY REVIEW

that the human instinctual apparatus is relatively underdeveloped. Nature throws human beings into existence without the instincts necessary to meet its challenges. Thus, humans must create their own tools for coping with their environment; society must make up for nature's deficiencies. Ultimately, this means creating the "world" that we inhabit.³ "World" in this sense is an overarching system of meaning through which we organize our experience, and it can be contrasted with the "environment," which is a mere given, a brute fact. Especially in closed, traditional societies, religion is a potent way of worldmaking. In Clifford Geertz's words, a religion formulates "conceptions of a general order of existence," and these conceptions "establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations."⁴ William James puts it more concretely:

The lustre of the present hour is always borrowed from the background of possibilities it goes with. Let our common experiences be enveloped in an eternal moral order; let our suffering have an immortal significance; let Heaven smile upon the earth, and deities pay their visits; let faith and hope be the atmosphere which man breathes in; — and his days pass by with zest; they stir with prospects, they thrill with remoter values.⁵

None of this entails that the religious person has a thoroughly worked out, logically coherent structure of belief ready to hand. The set of religious beliefs through which one's world is created may be largely tacit and his or her dispositions rooted in layers of experience that are no longer accessible. To return to the mythology of the Greeks, the pious Greek need not have had at his or her disposal the relatively systematic presentations of Hesiod and Homer. Participation in familiar religious rituals, and an intuitive sense that the gods exist and can impinge upon human affairs, may well have been sufficient.

Just how, then, did traditional Greek religion function as a way of worldmaking? Many commentators on Greek religion have noted the centrality of the ritual of sacrifice for the Greeks. Walter Burkert, who has established himself as one of the most influential interpreters of sacrifice in Greek and other ancient traditions, puts it this way:

RICHARD GRIGG

19

"the essence of the sacred act . . . is in Greek practice a straightforward and far from miraculous process: the slaughter and consumption of a domestic animal for a god. The most noble sacrificial animal is the ox, especially the bull; the most common is the sheep."⁶ The participants in the sacrifice ritual eat the meat of the slain animal, while the inedible portions are placed on an altar and burned. The gods are supposedly pleased by the aromatic smoke that rises heavenward from the altar. In the ritual of sacrifice, the mythological beliefs that we associate with the ancient Greeks become incarnate in religious practice.

On the surface at least, there would appear to be little difficulty in understanding how such sacrifice to the gods could serve to construct a meaningful world. The sacrificial rite sets up a reciprocal dynamic. On the one hand, it expresses belief in and devotion to the gods. On the other, regular participation in the ritual reinforces that belief and devotion. Thus, one comes to live in a world watched over by immortal beings, a world where "Heaven smile[s] upon the earth, and deities pay their visits," to use James's language. This is a world free from anomie and absurdity. It is the hospitable world invoked, and naïvely idealized, by the Romantics: witness Wordsworth's nostalgia for nature as experienced by the Greeks (in his sonnet "The World is Too Much with Us," quoted as the epigraph to my essay), or, in much the same vein, the young Hegel's admiration for the myth of Deucalion and Pyrrha, who "invited men . . . to friendship with the world, to nature."⁷

The sacrificial rite radiates out into almost every aspect of Greek religious activity. The festivals that structure the yearly round invariably involve a procession to a sanctuary where sacrifice is performed. Funeral rituals entail sacrifice and the pouring of libations at the graveside.⁸ When one wishes to consult an oracle, such as that presided over by the famous Pythia at the temple of Apollo in Delphi, sacrifice must be performed.⁹ Sacrifice to Zeus is an essential part of the athletic games held at Olympia and is even integrated into foot races: Philostratus reports that "the runners were one stadion away from the altar; in front of the altar stood a priest who gave the starting signal with a torch. The victor put fire to the sacred portions [of the sacrificial animal]. . . ."¹⁰

The ubiquity of sacrifice and its centrality for worldmaking are also evident in the fact that sacrifice plays a role in every layer of

community: there are sacrifices made at the family altar, sacrifices made on behalf of a particular city, and panhellenic sacrifices. Thus, the gods help to define and protect the numerous groups in which one participates. The world is built up, as it were, by various sacrificial rituals.

But perhaps the role of sacrifice in worldmaking is more complicated than our relatively straightforward, cognitively oriented reading suggests. Maybe it is not simply a matter of sacrifice self-consciously plugging human events into an overarching belief in the gods. Burkert suggests that when we examine the Prometheus myth dealing with the first instance of sacrifice, we discover that the Greeks were aware of an ambiguity in their sacred rite. How is it that, in a ritual supposedly dedicated to the gods, the human participants enjoy the meat of the sacrificial victim, while the gods are left with only smoke? According to Burkert, "However difficult it may be for mythological and for conceptual reflection to understand how such a sacrifice affects the god, what it means for men is always quite clear: community, *koinonia*. . . . From a psychological and ethological point of view, it is the communally enacted aggression and shared guilt which creates solidarity. The circle of the participants has closed itself off from outsiders."¹¹ In this reading, sacrifice is no less a way of worldmaking, but in order to uncover the worldmaking mechanism we must employ a "hermeneutic of suspicion," an interpretive approach that is not satisfied with what appears on the surface.

Suppose, then, that we adopt a yet more suspicious attitude. If sacrifice can create a social world, and if the crucial mechanism involved in its doing so is activated by the aggression and guilt shared by the community, wouldn't the most effective worldmaking sacrifice be human sacrifice? Surely it would represent the most extreme form of aggression and would result in the most powerful sense of guilt. Burkert does point out that "special attention has long been focused on the expulsion of the *pharmakos*, for here at the very centre of Greek civilization human sacrifice is indicated as a possibility, not to say as a fixed institution."¹² The *pharmakos* is a scapegoat, someone upon whom the threats facing the community are projected and who is thus expelled, or perhaps even destroyed, for the good of the community. Scapegoating may well be the origin of the Oedipus myth. It lies very near the surface of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*: Oedipus inquires of Creon about the oracle's solution to the crisis

threatening Thebes, "What is the rite of purification? How shall it be done?" And Creon replies, "By banishing a man, or expiation of blood by blood, since it is murder guilt which holds our city in this destroying storm."¹³

The possible worldmaking significance of scapegoating is most fully developed in the currently influential speculations of René Girard, who argues that the scapegoat mechanism is a means for a group to stop intragroup violence by refocusing it on an innocent outsider. For Girard, the religious overtones of the rite, indeed the whole notion of the sacred, arise as part of the self-deception entailed by the scapegoating process.¹⁴

In any case, it is clear that sacrifice, whether human or animal, has the ability to organize a world, and that part of its worldmaking capacity results from the fact that the sacrificial act is perceived as sanctioned by and performed in the service of the divine, for that perception roots the participants in the most fundamental layers of reality. The world of the ancient Greeks came about, in large part, via sacrificial rituals, coupled with the other elements of piety which sacrifice gathered round itself, including the myths about the gods.

But if we turn our attention from Mt. Olympus to the Academy at Athens, we discover that, for many of the Greek philosophers, traditional belief about the gods (at least in its Homeric guise) was already a "creed outworn," and a creed not nearly as charming as later ages would choose to imagine it. Rembrandt's great portrait of "Aristotle with a Bust of Homer," which hangs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, depicts the philosopher staring contemplatively at the image of the blind poet, and effectively evokes the puzzlement that the Homeric tradition undoubtedly created for the rationally oriented Greek: Homer was one of the pillars of Greek culture, but his portrayal of the gods was naive and unedifying. Hence the invention of allegory, the attempt to find some deeper meaning beneath the surface of an apparently superficial story, for Homer's tales of the gods could be salvaged only if they were taken figuratively to express something more profound than their literal sense.¹⁵

The apparent naivete of Homer's portrayal of the divine is, of course, largely a function of his anthropomorphism; the Homeric divinities are all-too-human. It was the sixth-century B.C.E. (Before Common Era) philosopher, Xenophanes of Colophon, who authored

22 SACRED HEART UNIVERSITY REVIEW

the classic dismissal of Olympian anthropomorphism: "If oxen and horses or lions had hands, and could paint with their hands, and produce works of art as men do, horses would paint the forms of the gods like horses, and oxen like oxen, and make their bodies in the image of their several kinds."¹⁶ Xenophanes here seems a precursor of moderns such as Ludwig Feuerbach. It is Feuerbach's contention that the gods of the polytheistic religions are projections based on the different personality types found within the human community.¹⁷ At the same time, Xenophanes' rebuke calls attention, albeit inadvertently, to one great boon from Greek anthropomorphism, viz., the superb iconography it generated. One thinks, for example, of Phidias' monumental rendering of Zeus and Athena.

The philosophers, however, found Homer's account of the gods not only naively anthropomorphic, but also unedifying. Perhaps the Olympian deities did not go so far as, in Shakespeare's image, to kill mortals for sport — Homer does have Hera accuse Artemis, "[You have been] empowered by Zeus to shoot down travailing women at your pleasure"¹⁸ — but they hardly provided the kind of model that Plato wanted the citizens of his ideal state to emulate. We cannot allow, says Plato, "any tales of gods warring and plotting and fighting against each other — these things are not true — if those who are to guard our city are to think it shameful to be easily driven to hate each other."¹⁹ Plato by no means denied the existence of the gods. Indeed, he held that they should be worshiped²⁰; he reported that Socrates' last words were a request that a sacrifice be offered to Asclepius, the son of Apollo.²¹ But it is also significant that Plato did not identify these gods with ultimate reality. That distinction belonged to a wholly transcendent principle, the Idea of the Good. The Good is "the cause of all that is right and beautiful." It has "produced in the visible world both light and the fount of light, while in the intelligible world it is itself that which produces and controls truth and intelligence."²² Aristotle's ultimate is no less impressive, and no less removed from Olympian anthropomorphism: he points to an Unmoved Mover, an eternal act of Thought thinking itself.²³

The arguments of the philosophers clearly undermined the foundations of traditional Greek piety, but those arguments alone were not enough to make the whole religious edifice tumble. Human beings do not live by logic alone, and firmly established patterns of behavior often live on long after they have lost intellectual integrity; a

world has many strata, and philosophical reflection cannot by itself destroy an old world or create a new one. Thus, Greek religion continued to wield influence well into the Roman period. It would finally die only when it encountered a total framework more powerful than itself, a more attractive way of worldmaking.

Ninian Smart suggests that there were at least eight factors that made the Christian faith an attractive, and finally triumphant, worldview in the Roman Empire.²⁴ First, Christianity was universal in scope. Second, the notion of a God-human, so central to Christian claims about Jesus, was a familiar one in the Greco-Roman world. Third, Christianity could pick up themes from Greek philosophy and thus appeal to the educated. Fourth, it offered a more rigorous commitment than competing cults. Fifth, periodic persecutions reinforced the solidarity of the Christian community. Sixth, Constantine championed Christianity because he believed that it could provide a unifying ideology for the empire and thus counter a chaotic pluralism. Seventh, the Christian religion, with its episcopal structure, was efficiently organized. Eighth, it was more optimistic than religious movements with which it competed. For all these reasons, and perhaps others, the Judeo-Christian tradition triumphed over Greco-Roman religion in the struggle to form the Western world.

But Judaism and Christianity did not simply leave Greece behind: While Tertullian and his ilk might wish things had developed differently — it is Tertullian who asks rhetorically, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?”²⁵ — Jews and Christians soon discovered that Greek philosophical speculation provided an alluring conceptual framework within which to reason about Judeo-Christian monotheism. Etienne Gilson points out that, for Plato, “Truly *to be* means to be immaterial, immutable, necessary, and intelligible.”²⁶ Might not such Platonic insights about Being prove useful in conceptualizing the God who had announced to the ancient Israelites, “I AM WHO AM”?²⁷ Indeed, the notion that the Judeo-Christian God is immaterial, immutable, necessary, and intelligible came to be associated with “classical theism,” i.e., the venerable, orthodox conception of the nature of God.

The influence of Greek philosophy on Judaism and Christianity can, of course, be seen with particular clarity in the thought of certain theologians. For example, Augustine, the fifth-century bishop whose

24 SACRED HEART UNIVERSITY REVIEW

thinking proved crucial to the later development of Christian belief, was indebted to a form of Platonic philosophy known as Neo-Platonism: Aristotle's influence is evident in the Middle Ages in the work of the Jewish thinker, Moses Maimonides, and in that of perhaps the greatest of all Christian philosophers, Thomas Aquinas. But the theological riches of Greek philosophy were not exhausted in the premodern period. One of the most creative contemporary religious thinkers, the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, draws on Plato's notion of the Good to articulate his own view of God as the "infinity of moral responsibility that I encounter in the face of another person."²⁸

The philosophers' use of allegory to mine deeper truths from Homer also had its influence, for theologians found allegory a useful tool for interpreting the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. Philo of Alexandria, a Jewish thinker who lived from approximately 25 B.C.E. to 40 C.E., employed allegory in interpreting the Hebrew Bible. The Christian thinker, Origen, followed suit in the third century. By the Middle Ages, Christian exegetes often found up to four separate layers of meaning in a single passage of Scripture: a historical or literal sense, a moral sense, a sense dealing with Christ and the Church, and a sense focused on life after death.

Finally, Greek philosophy had a role in the formation of the Christian view of the physical component of human existence. Whereas traditional Greek religion seems not to have separated body and spirit, commentators often charge later Greek philosophical approaches to human nature with dualism, a separation of physical body and immaterial, immortal soul, so that the body is denigrated as the "prison of the soul." Here Judaism and Christianity sometimes disagree, and their disagreement centers precisely on the influence of the Greeks: Jewish thinkers have complained that the Christian view of man and woman is too Greek, and that it abandons the biblical insight that the whole of God's creation, including its physical dimension, is "very good."²⁹ It is the apostle Paul to whom critics often point as the single most important figure through whom pessimistic Greek notions of the material world entered the Christian tradition.³⁰

Whether the impact of Greek philosophy on Christianity, and to a lesser extent on Judaism, has been positive or negative has been debated from the beginning; there have always been those who

maintain that Athens has nothing to teach Jerusalem, as well as those who hold that philosophy provides important conceptual tools for unpacking what is already present in the Judeo-Christian message.³¹ What is beyond dispute is that, for good or for ill, the Greeks have played an important part in the formation of Western religious sensibilities, though they have done so, not via their own traditional religious practices, but through the speculations of their philosophers.

Notes

¹*The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 1987 ed., s.v. "Greek Religion," by Jean-Pierre Vernant. This is not Vernant's own position, but his description of one current of thought on Greek myth.

²The phrase is Nelson Goodman's, though he does not apply it specifically to religion. See *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978).

³See, e.g., Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: a Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday-Anchor, 1967). Note that the sociologist's claim about our social construction of a world is neutral regarding the truth of any particular worldmaking framework. From the theologian's point of view, the framework that we bring to our environment in order to construct a world may be the product of revelation.

⁴Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 90.

⁵William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: New American Library, 1958), p. 122.

⁶Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, trans. John Raffan (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 55.

⁷*On Christianity: Early Theological Writings by Friedrich Hegel*, trans. T.M. Knox (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), pp. 184-85.

⁸Homer's *Odyssey* provides a graphic account of sacrifice for the dead. See XI, 20-50.

⁹It was this oracle that pronounced Socrates the wisest of all persons. See *Apology* 21.

¹⁰Quoted in Burkert, p. 106. Note that the opening ceremonies of today's Olympic games, where an athlete with torch in hand runs to a huge lamp symbolic of the games and ignites it, seem to faintly echo this ancient sacrificial ritual.

¹¹Burkert, p. 58.

26 SACRED HEART UNIVERSITY REVIEW

¹²Burkert, p. 82.

¹³David Grene and Richmond Lattimore, gen. eds., *The Complete Greek Tragedies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953-1960), *Sophocles I*, trans. David Grene, Robert Fitzgerald, and Elizabeth Wyckoff, pp. 14-15.

¹⁴See, for example, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977). Girard and Burkert confront one another regarding the proper reading of sacrifice, in *Violent Origins: Walter Burkert, René Girard, and Jonathan Z. Smith on Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation*, ed. Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987).

¹⁵Hans-Georg Gadamer is one who holds that this is the origin of allegory. See *Truth and Method*, trans. and ed. by Garrett Barden and John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1975), p. 66.

¹⁶Quoted in Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 1, part 1 (Garden City, NY: Image, 1962), p. 64.

¹⁷It is important to recall that, for Feuerbach, anthropomorphism and projection characterize monotheism too; the one God of the Judeo-Christian tradition is nothing but the human species writ large, and, in the end, "theology is anthropology." See Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), p. xxxvii.

¹⁸*The Anger of Achilles: Homer's Iliad*, trans. Robert Graves (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1959), p. 337.

¹⁹*Plato's Republic* trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1974), p. 48 [*Republic* 378 b-c].

²⁰For example, *Laws* 717 a-b.

²¹*Phaedo* 118.

²²*Plato's Republic*, trans. Grube, p. 170 [*Republic* 517 c].

²³See *Metaphysics* L 1071b3-5a10.

²⁴Ninian Smart, *The World's Religions* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1989), pp. 241-42.

²⁵Quoted in Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 1: *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 49.

²⁶Etienne Gilson, *God and Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1941), p. 24.

²⁷Exodus 3:14.

²⁸See *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981).

²⁹Genesis 1:31

³⁰For example, Milton Steinberg, *Basic Judaism* (New York: Harcourt, 1947), pp. 111-13.

RICHARD GRIGG

27

³¹The latter position is illustrated by the contention that the Christian doctrinal teaching formulated at the Council of Nicea in 325, which drew on the vocabulary of Greek philosophy to explain the relation of God the Son to God the Father, simply gave philosophical expression to a truth already implicit in the New Testament. See, for example, John Courtney Murray, *The Problem of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964); Bernard Lonergan, *The Way to Nicea: The Dialectical Development of Trinitarian Theology*, trans. Conn O'Donovan (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976).

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4

9

14