Outline-history of Greek religion

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OUTLINE-HISTORY OF GREEK RELIGION

CHAPTER I

THE SOURCES AND THE EVIDENCE

The foundation of a serious and scientific study of Greek religion, as distinct from the mere mythology of Hellas, may almost be said to have been an achievement of the last generation of scholars. And it is only through recent research that the Hellenic spirit, so creative and imperial in the domains of literature, art and science, can be recognised as manifesting itself not unworthily in the sphere of religion.

The history of Greek religion means, partly, the account and the interpretation of the various rites, cults and cult-ideas of the various Greek families, tribes and communities; partly the estimate of the religious temperament, both of the masses and of the individuals who emerged from among them and of whom some record has been preserved.

Now as the Greek world in the long period of its independence was never organised as a single State, the attempt to give a summary and general account of its religion is confronted with the perplexity arising from the often incalculable diversity of
religious forms and ideas in the different centres of its social life, which was in the highest degree centrifugal. Nevertheless, as will be shown, we find in the midst of manifold local variation certain uniformity of religious psychology, making for uniformity of practice, which enables us to deliver certain general pronouncements about the whole.

_Ancient Sources : Literary._—Our real knowledge of any ancient religion depends obviously on the copiousness and variety of our records. And it is likely to be more luminous, if the society in question expressed its religious life not only in surviving literature, but also in surviving art. Of both these kinds the student of Greek religion has an unusually rich material.

For in spite of its secular freedom, which is its salient achievement, Greek literature in its highest and most popular forms, as well as in its narrower and more special, is deeply infused or preoccupied with religion and religious myth. In fact, it reflects the vivifying penetration of religion into all parts of Greek activity and mental life. This is obviously true of the epic period, which produced the two types of the chivalrous and the theologic epic, and which has left us most valuable material for the religious history of the tenth and ninth centuries in the Homeric poems, and of the eighth and seventh centuries in the poems of Hesiod and in the ‘Homeric’ hymns. It is none the less true of the great lyric movement that followed upon that, when the greatest poets devoted themselves to the composition of songs for festal-religious occasions or of hymns for the service of temple or altar; and besides these whose great names and fragments of
whose great works survive, there was another less distinguished group of special ‘hieratic’ poets, such as Pamphos and Mousaios, who composed hymns for the service of certain mystery-cults, and whose compositions were preserved as liturgical documents by the priestly families that administered them.

The sententious ethical-political poetry of the sixth century, the elegiacs of Theognis and Solon, is instinct with religious emotion and reflection. And the greatest product of the poetic genius of Hellas, the tragic drama, is of a religious character, both in respect of its origin and much of its subject-matter. Finally, the later learned poetry of the Ptolemaic period, the Kassandra of Lycophron, the hymns and other works of Kallimachos, the epic poem of Apollonios Rhodios, are full of antiquarian religious lore.

At the same time, our knowledge is much indebted to the great prose-writers of Greece, the philosophers, historians and orators; among the philosophers, especially to Plato, who more copiously than any of the others reveals to us, however much he idealises, the religious psychology and cult-phenomena of his period; among the historians, especially to Herodotus, who is the intellectual ancestor of the modern anthropologist and student of comparative religion and whose presentation of the facts is coloured with religious conviction. The works of the Attic orators are of special value for our purpose, first because the classical orator was far more apt than the modern to dilate on religious themes and appeal to religious sentiments, as religion was far more closely interfused with political and social life; secondly, because we are more sure of the orator than we can be of the poetic or philo-
sophic writer that his words are attuned to the average pitch of popular belief and sentiment.

It is true then that all the great fields of Greek literature make their several contributions to the material of our subject. And besides the works of the great masters, the student has to reckon with the secondary and parasitic work of the later scholiasts, compilers and commentators, which is even more replete with the special information upon which the history of Greek religion can be built. The study of it is, in fact, almost coextensive with the whole study of Greek literature.

But amidst this profusion of material we must specially mark the works of those ancients who wrote direct treatises on the various religious phenomena, on the Gods, the cult-practices, the theologic and mythologic systems of the Hellenic societies. The earliest of such works that have come down to us are the poems of Hesiod and the Hesiodic school, the Works and Days and the Theogony, while of parts of the ‘HOMERIC’ hymns the special theme is the attributes and functions of the various divinities. But it was not till the period of scientific activity after Aristotle that definite treatises in prose on different departments of the national religion began to be rife. A chapter on sacrifice by Theophrastos is mainly preserved for us by Porphyry. The writers of ‘Atthides’ or Attic history and antiquities, who belonged mainly to the third century, were special workers in this field; Philochoros, the chief of them, wrote ‘on festivals,’ ‘on sacred days,’ ‘on divination,’ ‘on the Attic mysteries’; Istros, the slave and friend of Kallimachos, on the ‘manifestations of Apollo’ and on