The higher aspects of Greek religion. Lectures delivered at Oxford and in London in April and May, 1911

Farnell Lewis Richard
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THE HIGHER ASPECTS
OF
GREEK RELIGION

LECTURES
DELIVERED AT OXFORD AND IN LONDON
IN APRIL AND MAY 1911

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HIGHER ASPECTS
OF GREEK RELIGION

LECTURE I

INTRODUCTORY SKETCH

There are many salient points of contrast that may guide our classification of religions; but none is more significant than that which strikes us at first glance in comparing early Hellenic polytheism with, for instance, early Christianity. We have, in the first, a religion that is pre-eminently social-political—one, that is, in which man’s attachment to the divine powers is rooted in his corporate life, in the economy of the household, the tribe, the city; in the second, one whose objective or primary concern is the personal individual soul in its spiritual and mystic relations with God.

In selecting, then, the higher social aspects of Greek polytheism as the main subject of this course, I shall not be presenting the whole picture, indeed, but at least the dominant features of this religion, and an aspect which occasionally runs risk of being ignored by some of our English anthropologists. In my concluding lecture I shall give a short estimate of the higher personal, as distinct from the purely
social, religion of the Hellenes; for the subject is of great interest in itself, and in the study of certain departments of religious morality the one essentially involves the other.

As Greek religion is unusually complex, any partial statement of it is apt to be misleading unless accompanied by clear comprehension of the whole. For this years of study are necessary; but it may assist the understanding of this special subject that I am going to treat, if I preface it by an outline sketch of the general phenomena and of the conclusions at which I have arrived concerning them.

Greek religion is presented to us by its various records mainly as a polytheism of personal divinities, grouped in certain family relationships around and under a supreme god. Theoretically the chief divinity is male in sky, earth, and sea, but in certain localities the goddess-cult is more powerful. The higher beings are rarely recognisable as personifications of physical forces of nature, and it is only of a very few of them that a nature-origin can be posited or proved; and though many of them have special departments of nature for their peculiar concern, they are chiefly to be regarded as ethical and intellectual personalities, friendly on the whole to man and powerful to aid in all that concerns his physical and social life. These elements in Greek religion belong to theism, and, from the social and political point of view, these are by far the most important. And in these theistic creations of the Hellene the dominant impulse was that which we call anthropomorphism, a mode of feeling