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Polis Religion – A Critical Appreciation

Abstract: This article explores the scope and limits of the model of “polis religion” as one of the most powerful interpretative concepts in current scholarship in the field. It examines the notion of the ‘embeddedness’ of ancient Greek religion in the polis as well as the unity and diversity of Greek religious beliefs and practices, and discusses in how far the model is able to capture developments beyond the Classical period. The article looks at religious phenomena and forms of religious organization above and below the polis level. I argue that the strengths of the model lie in its capacity to explain an important structuring principle of ancient Greek religion. The weaknesses of the model are due to the fact that it is focused too narrowly on the polis as the primary discourse of power relevant for the study of ancient Greek religion.

Résumé : Cet article étudie l’étendue et les limites du modèle de la *polis religion* dans la mesure où il s’agit d’un des concepts interprétatifs les plus forts de la recherche actuelle dans le domaine. Il s’agit de se pencher sur la notion d’*embeddedness* de la religion grecque ancienne à l’intérieur de la *polis*, de même que sur l’unité et la diversité des croyances et pratiques religieuses des Grecs. On discutera également de la pertinence du modèle pour appréhender les développements qui vont au-delà de la période classique. L’article prête attention aux phénomènes religieux et aux formes d’organisation religieuse qui excèdent le niveau de la cité. Je suggère que la force de ce modèle réside dans sa capacité à expliquer un important principe de structuration de la religion grecque ancienne. La faiblesse du modèle vient du fait qu’il se concentre trop étroitement sur la *polis* comme principal discours de pouvoir adapté à l’étude de la religion grecque ancienne.

1. Introduction

In current scholarship, particularly in the Anglo-American and Francophone worlds, “polis religion” has become a powerful interpretative model for the study of Greek religion.¹ The model is now sufficiently well established for us to need to explore its implications as well as the alternatives that complement or move beyond it. Surprisingly, however, and in contrast to scholarship on Roman religion, the implications of the model are rarely discussed in the study

¹ Earlier versions and aspects of this article were presented at the annual convention of the *American Philological Association* (APA) in San Diego in 2007 and at a conference in honour of Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood at Reading University in 2008. I would like to thank the audiences at both conferences as well as Robin Osborne, Richard Gordon, Jan Bremmer, and Bruce Lincoln and the anonymous referees of *Kernos* for commenting on earlier drafts of this article.

of ancient Greek religion. There is no single account that directly and comprehensively responds to Sourvinou-Inwood's two methodological articles on polis religion – the most explicit conceptual formulation of the model.²

This article offers a critical evaluation of where we stand. It identifies key problems in the scholarly use of the polis religion model and examines how individual scholars working with it have positioned their work in regard to them. A distinct focus will be on the way the model is used in the anglophone world (although French scholars, most notably François de Polignac's work, are also occasionally brought into the picture).³ Rather than rejecting the model outright, the article aims to move current debates forward by exploring its scope and limits. It examines polis religion in its different forms and formulations and discusses the ways in which some scholars have recently sought to overcome the “polis-orientation” implicit in large parts of the work done in this field.

2. What is Polis Religion?

Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood coined the term “polis religion” to describe the “embeddedness” of Greek religion in the polis as the basic unit of Greek social and political life.⁴ Significantly, however, her definition of polis religion transcends the level of the individual polis. Polis religion operates on three levels of Greek society: the polis, the “world-of-the-polis system,” and the panhellenic dimension.⁵ The definition of Greek religion as polis religion follows this tripartite structure of Greek society and runs along the following lines.

During the Archaic and Classical periods, Greece was a conglomerate of largely autonomous city-states with no overall political or administrative

² While many works in the field are implicitly based on a characterisation of Greek religion as polis religion, the strengths and weaknesses of this model are rarely discussed. Exceptions (which will be discussed below) are the contributions of COLE (1994), BURKERT (1995), JAMESON (1997). In the field of Roman religion, however, the debate concerning the implications and the applicability of the polis model is much more advanced: see WOOLF (1997), BENDLIN (2000), p. 115-135, RÜPKE (2004), SCHEID (2005), p. 125-128. Interestingly, there is no separate entry on ‘polis religion’ in recent reference works, such as PRICE & KEARNS (2003); JONES (2005).

³ The French scholarly discourse attributes to the mediation of the city a more inclusive and constrictive role than the anglophone literature; in French scholarship “polis religion” is not necessarily and not always synonymous with “civic religion” or “religion of the polis”. By focusing on the arguably more closely formulated Anglophone model, I hope to cast light on the strengths and weaknesses of the model in its most succinct formulation. The anglophone formulations of “polis religion” (and indirectly my discussion of them) are hence grounded in a certain historiographical model of the city as a relatively closed and horizontally layered social system embracing the *demos*, *phratries*, etc. (more on this below).

⁴ SOURVINOU-INWOOD (2000a [1990]), SOURVINOU-INWOOD (2000b [1988]).

⁵ See SOURVINOU-INWOOD (2000a [1990]), p. 13.

structure. In the sphere of religion the polis provided the major context for religious beliefs and practices. The reach of Greek religious cults and festivals with their public processions and communal forms of sacrifice and prayer mapped onto the reach of polis institutions, such as the *demes*, the *phratries* and the *genē*.

At the same time, the religious inventories of the individual city-states resembled each other because of their shared past and the spread of epic poetry throughout the Greek world.⁶ In particular the poems of Homer and Hesiod had unified and structured the Greek pantheon. Religion thus offered a common set of ideologies and values, such as shared notions of purity and pollution, sacred and profane, human and divine, which were a reference point throughout the Greek world. Herodotus has the Athenians refer to the temples of the gods and the sacrifices as part of a shared feeling of Greekness.⁷ Greek religious beliefs and practices provided a strong link between the individual polis and the rest of the Greek world.

As the polis constituted the basic unit of Greek life, the panhellenic dimension of Greek religion – the religious institutions situated beyond the polis level, such as the large panhellenic sanctuaries or amphictyonies and religious leagues – was accessed through constant reference to the polis and its symbolic order. Whenever a delegation visited the oracle of Apollo at Delphi, or an athlete participated in the Olympic Games in honour of Zeus, they did so as members of a specific polis. Sourvinou-Inwood thus concludes that polis religion embodies, negotiates, and informs all religious discourse, including religious practices above the level of the individual poleis.⁸

In its general formulation, the model of polis religion reflects Durkheimian and structuralist efforts to ‘make sense’ of Greek religion as a symbolic system. In particular, the assumption of polis religion as the foundation of a moral community (in the sense of a community sharing a common set of norms and conventions) is Durkheimian in origin. The explicitly structuralist image frequently evoked to describe the symbolic nature of Greek religion is that of religion as a shared ‘language’ which enabled the Greeks to communicate their experiences of the external world to each other.⁹ At the same time, the model of polis religion attempts to overcome the ahistoricity of the strictly structuralist (or even formalist) perspective. It conceptualizes the systemic quality of Greek religion as that of a ‘meaningful structure’ grounded in the specific cultural setting of Archaic and Classical Greece. The concept of polis religion can hence be understood as an attempt to overcome the weakness inherent in its

⁶ SOURVINOU-INWOOD (2000b [1988]), p. 47.

⁷ Hdt., VIII, 144, 2. See PARKER (1998), p. 10-11 for a discussion of this passage.

⁸ SOURVINOU-INWOOD (2000a [1990]), p. 20.

⁹ See in detail GOULD (2001 [1985]). See also BURKERT (1985), p. 119, BOWERSOCK (1990), p. 7, DE POLIGNAC (1991), p. 152. On Greek religion as a ‘language’ see also KINDT (2009).

structuralist roots by grounding religion in the specific cultural setting of the Archaic and Classical polis as the cultural context of its symbolic meaning.

3. Polis Religion – A Critical Evaluation

3.1. The ‘Embeddedness’ of Greek Religion

Focus on the polis as the basic unit of Greek life gave rise to a crucial assumption which underlies many works in the field: that of the ‘embeddedness’ of Greek religion in the polis. Scholars have made overlapping, but not fully congruent claims about this. What do we mean if we say that religion is ‘embedded’ in the polis? And to what extent is this claim correct?

The idea that Greek religion was embedded in the polis acted in part as a check on the intrusion of concepts derived from the study of modern religions, in particular Christianity. Greek religion differed from its modern counterparts in that it had no dogma, no official creed, no Bible, no priesthood in the form of a specially trained and entitled group of people. In the absence of a church, religion was organised alongside the socio-political structures of the polis. At the same time, Greek religion was not seen as an abstract category, largely distinct and separate from other spheres of life. Greek religion was religion-in-practice and Greek religious practices permeated all spheres of life. The embeddedness of Greek religion in the polis means that religious practice formed an integral part of the larger network of relationships within the polis.¹⁰ As a consequence, it is not possible to reflect upon Greek religion as a category in and of itself.¹¹

Walter Burkert has identified three claims concerning the quality of the link between Greek religion and the polis inherent in the model of polis religion.¹² According to Burkert, the concept encompasses, firstly, self-representation of the community through religious cults. Secondly, it suggests control of religious practices by the polis through its decision-making organs. Thirdly, according to Burkert, polis religion sometimes implies that the polis created and transformed its religious institutions, that the polis ‘actually makes religion.’¹³

¹⁰ The same kind of embeddedness is usually assumed in studies of Roman religion. Jörg Rüpke’s article *Kult jenseits der Polisreligion* [RÜPKE (2004)] is based on a formalized and spatial definition of polis religion too simple to offer a persuasive account of religious practices that transcend the polis model.

¹¹ The idea that single areas of social interaction are unavailable for conceptualization was perhaps most strongly propagated by Moses Finley, who argued that there was no such thing as the ancient Greek economy [FINLEY (1973)]. On the notion of “embeddedness” see also BREMMER (1994), p. 2-4, SCHEID (2005), p. 126 (in the field of Roman religion).

¹² BURKERT (1995), p. 202.

¹³ BURKERT (1995), p. 202. DE POLIGNAC (1991), p. 78-79 emphasises that this should not be seen as a programmatic policy of the individual poleis.

The qualitative difference between Burkert's second and third claims is that while both stress the aspect of control, the third assigns an even larger degree of agency to the polis by presenting religion as actively shaped by it according to its interests. In contrast to this definition, however, most scholars working with the model of polis religion prefer a more subtle formulation of the link between polis and religion, largely by-passing the question of direct control. In particular, the Oxford version of polis religion presents religion as merely mapped onto the institutional landscape of the polis, thus de-emphasising the aspect of agency. In the works of scholars like Robert Parker and Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, the distinction between Burkert's first and second claim thus becomes fluid as the socio-political structures of the polis are reformulated and maintained through their representation in religious ritual.

But can the communal self-representation of social groupings in the polis through religious cults serve as the ultimate proof that the polis and Greek religion were congruent? From the point of view of the polis, it is certainly correct that "each significant grouping within the polis was articulated and given identity through cult," as Sourvinou-Inwood has argued.¹⁴ The important subdivisions of the polis, such as the *demes* and *phratries*, were all represented in specific cults and even politically marginalized groups, such as women, had their own festivals and religious services specifically reserved for them.¹⁵

The representation of the social groupings of the polis in Greek religion, however, does not allow us to conclude the reverse: that Greek religion was entirely absorbed by the polis. There is plenty of evidence for religious practices unmediated by and without any obvious link to the polis. Take for example the consultation of oracles, such as those at Delphi, Dodona and Didyma or any of the less-known oracular shrines. In support of the polis-model one could, of course, point out that the fee (*pelanos*) that had to be paid before the consultation was negotiated between the officials of the oracle and the polis from which the consultant came.¹⁶ While the economic side of oracle consultations thus fits into the framework of polis religion this is not always true for the responses received there. Our sources tell us, for example, of oracle consultations of a very personal nature, the significance of which is more embedded in personal circumstances than in polis concerns. In particular the corpus of responses from Dodona attests to a variety of personal issues on which divine advice was

¹⁴ SOURVINOU-INWOOD (2000a [1990]), p. 27.

¹⁵ SOURVINOU-INWOOD (2000a [1990]), p. 27-37, SOURVINOU-INWOOD (2000b (1988)), p. 38-44. A similar point is made by Jan Bremmer who states: 'In ancient Greece, ... religion was totally embedded in society – no sphere of life lacked a religious aspect.' BREMMER (1994), p. 2. On the religion of the *demes* and other subunits of the polis see in detail JAMESON (1997).

¹⁶ On the economic side of oracle consultations see ROSENBERGER (1999).

sought.¹⁷ Questions at Dodona were typically scratched on lead tablets, some of which classical archaeology has brought to light. Callicrates's question of whether he will receive a child from his wife Nike, for instance, hardly reflects a polis concern.¹⁸ Likewise, Thrasyboulos's desire to know which god he should sacrifice to in order to improve his eyesight expresses a personal health issue and hence a private concern. The same is true when Agis consults Zeus regarding the whereabouts of certain lost blankets and whether or not they were stolen.¹⁹ The polis model is of little help to us in understanding the motivations, intentions and dynamics of these private oracle consultations. Another example of Greek religion beyond the polis is the festival calendar, which is embedded in the agricultural year rather than in the institutions of the polis. Greek religion transcends the polis. Even though his attitude towards religion is not straightforward, Aristotle's perspective seems to support this view: in *Politics*, he imagined a polis from which religion was more or less entirely absent.²⁰

Such examples reveal another dimension of the embeddedness of Greek religion, which is not included in Burkert's list: the embeddedness of Greek religion in what could be called the symbolic order of the polis.²¹ Although private concerns behind oracle consultations and the Greek festive calendar may fall outside the scope of an institutionalized definition of the polis, they remain within the limits of the shared beliefs, ideas and ideals of the polis community.

Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, in particular, inspired perhaps by work in cultural anthropology (notably by Clifford Geertz),²² has focused on religion as part of a more general semantics of Greek culture. Several of her works explore religious phenomena as forms of collective representation, which must be studied in the context of the larger cultural system that generated and received them.²³ To "read" such religious symbols we must place them back in their original culture. "Reading" as an act of decoding cultural symbols is a central

¹⁷ On the Oracle of Zeus at Dodona see the still authoritative (but conceptually outdated) account by PARKE (1967). It is precisely those oracles that do not fit into the matrix of polis religion which have received relatively little scholarly attention. However, see recently E. LHÔTE, *Les lamelles oraculaires de Dodone*, Geneva, 2006.

¹⁸ BCH 80 (1956), p. 300; SEG 19 (1963), p. 149; LHÔTE (2006), p. 118-119, no. 48. See also PARKE (1967), p. 265.

¹⁹ CARPANOS (1878), p. 10 (Plate 36.1); PARKE (1967), p. 272; LHÔTE (2006), p. 249-250, no. 121.

²⁰ This somewhat strange omission, in the light of the importance of religion in and for the polis, is put in context in his *Metaphysics*, which does have a god, but one that is removed from human interests and concerns.

²¹ On political power and religious symbols see KINDT (forthcoming 2009).

²² Geertz's notion of religion is best formulated in GEERTZ (1966), reprinted in GEERTZ (1973).

²³ See SOURVINOU-INWOOD (1991), (1995), (2003).

concept running through all of her monographs. Sourvinou-Inwood's main goal, then, is to reconstruct the ancient perceptual filters which have shaped these symbols and through which they were perceived in their own time.

This is notably different from, and more powerful than, the simple claim that the polis controlled religious services and institutions. It is also a more all-encompassing concept than the view that Greek religion was projected onto the socio-political landscape of the polis, an idea which Sourvinou-Inwood has suggested elsewhere.²⁴ Yet the question arises whether the label of polis religion is still valid. What aspects of this kind of embeddedness are polis-specific? Are the perceptual filters situated first and foremost in the institutions and the ideology of the polis? As soon as we move away from matters of agency and look at larger religious concepts, such as death, pollution and piety, we find that the symbolic order of the polis coincides with the symbolic order of Greek culture and society more generally. Taking this into account, is it still correct to speak of polis religion, or should we rather say that Greek religion was embedded in Greek culture with the polis as its paradigmatic worshipping group?

To conclude this line of argument: the relationship between the polis and Greek religion is more complex than has been assumed. As Burkert rightly remarked: "Polis religion is a characteristic and representative part of Greek religion, but only part of it. There is religion without the polis, even if there is no polis without religion."²⁵ In other words: the polis is no less embedded in Greek religion than Greek religion in the polis. The polis provides an essential framework for assessing Greek religion but it should by no means be the only one.

3.2. Inconsistencies

The systemic perspective on Greek religion has been criticised for assuming too much coherence and internal consistency in Greek religious beliefs and practices. In particular, John Gould has pointed to the limits of the assumption of internal coherence within the system of Greek religion: "... Greek religion remains fundamentally improvisatory. ... there is always room for new improvisation, for the introduction of new cults and new observances: Greek religion is not theologically fixed and stable, and it has no tradition of exclusion or finality: it is an open, not a closed system."²⁶

²⁴ SOURVINOU-INWOOD (2000a [1990]), (2000b [1988]).

²⁵ BURKERT (1995), p. 203.

²⁶ GOULD (2001 [1985]), p. 7-8. See also JAMESON (1997), p. 184.

Unfortunately, in the historiographic practice of works on Greek religion, such concessions have all too frequently remained mere programmatic statements, made in the introduction in order to silence potential disagreement before the writer produces yet another account of polis religion which makes perfect sense in all its aspects. According to such views, ideally, all groups present in the polis are perfectly proficient in the “language” of religion, thus creating a consensual, internally consistent and mono-vocal symbolic order. Although scholars working with the model readily admit that the polis consists of different individuals with different, even diverging attitudes, there is little space in their works for personal religion, the fault-lines between contradictory religious beliefs and practices, and the internal frictions, inconsistencies and tensions springing from them. Structurally speaking, deviance from the common Greek “language” of religion is conceivable only as a conscious inversion of the rules set by the polis, thus staying within the same symbolic order.²⁷

Against such tendencies, Henk S. Versnel dedicated two volumes to the revelation of inconsistencies within the system of Greek religion.²⁸ A similar point is made by Paul Veyne concerning the coexistence of divergent, even contradictory forms of belief in ancient Greece.²⁹ Veyne makes a strong case for the need to look at beliefs in the context of varying concepts of truth. These concepts of truth, Veyne argues, are inherent in different epistemological discourses (such as mythology and historiography) and much of Veyne’s interpretative effort is spent on uncovering their hidden rules. Moreover, Veyne reminds us about variations in religious beliefs over time, which change together with the concepts of truth which underlie them. A good example is perhaps the changing Greek attitude towards mythology and the supernatural. What was for Homer and others a special realm of knowledge authenticated by the Muses, to which the distinction between truth and falsehood did not apply, increasingly became subject to criticism and intellectual scrutiny. In the works of Herodotus, Thucydides and other fifth-century thinkers, for example, narratives about the gods were subjected to critical inquiry; in their writings, the supernatural is no longer on a separate plane but has to “fit in with the rest of reality” to reassert its place in the cultural and historical memory of Greece.³⁰ It

²⁷ Structuralism allows for the constant generation of novel variants, arising against the background of earlier attempts that worked with the same symbolic constructs and structural patterns. See also Bendlin’s point that versatility of religious ritual should be seen not as a symptom of its decline but as a feature of its vigour: BENDLIN (2000), p. 119.

²⁸ VERSNEL (1990), (1993). Versnel uses such inconsistencies and ambiguities principally as entry points to an alternative reading of religious phenomena, such as henocentrism and myth and ritual.

²⁹ VEYNE (1988).

³⁰ VEYNE (1988), p. 32. See also the critical discussion of Veyne’s position by BUXTON (1994), p. 155-158.

follows from Veyne's work that Greek religion was not mono-vocal discourse and that its different aspects and their relationship to each other changed over time.

The construction of the polis as an internally and chronologically more or less consistent and monolithic symbolic order is a simplification, which does not do justice to the internal dynamics of these states. Recent work in social anthropology suggests that we should replace the concept of culture as a consensual sphere of interaction with a more flexible and fluid understanding of it as open to the internal frictions resulting from change and social transformation.³¹ Josiah Ober has borrowed concepts of culture from social anthropology and introduced them into the field of Classics.³² Appropriating Sewell's model of a "thinly coherent" culture Ober emphasizes the need to allow for multiple, even divergent identities within Greek society ("the cultures within Greek culture").³³

In contrast to a "thick coherence", the assumption of "thin coherence" de-emphasises high levels of connectedness between individuals within one culture zone, thus allowing space for cultural contestation and transformation. Accordingly, Ober envisages a study of Hellenism with a strong focus on the "dialectical tensions" between various levels and microcosms of Greek culture. Greek, in particular Athenian society, thus appears as a space of internal contestation and debate, with the political (that is the polis) at its centre but by no means limited to it.³⁴

The model of a thinly coherent Greek culture has yet to be applied to the study of Greek religion, but a more flexible concept of culture as contested and changing would certainly be productive. Thin coherence would, for example, allow us to bring in religious movements such as Orphism and the use of magical practices, which have so far been marginalised in the study of polis religion. Ultimately, we will have to consider the link between each one of them and the polis separately, for they relate differently to the structures and institutions of polis religion. But despite the differences between these religious movements and practices they do not fit all into the conventional model of polis religion.

Discussing the power of the polis-model to explain religious beliefs and practices above the polis level, Sourvinou-Inwood states that "polis religion embraces, contains, and mediates all religious discourse – with the ambiguous

³¹ See for example Jean and John Comaroff's work: COMAROFF & COMAROFF (1991), (1997). See also the review section of the *AHR* 108/2 (April, 2003), p. 434-478 for a general assessment of the relevance of their work for cultural history more generally.

³² OBER (2005).

³³ See the book with the same title in which Ober's article appeared first: DOUGHERTY & KURKE (2003).

³⁴ OBER (2005), p. 77-82.

and uncertain exception of some sectarian discourse.”³⁵ Her cautious ambivalence towards “sectarian” religious beliefs and practices is symptomatic of the general approach to these cults of scholars working with the polis model. Religious beliefs and practices that do not conform to the polis model, that is those practices that are not administered by the polis and that do not represent the socio-political order of the polis, are frequently seen as being *by definition* not religion proper. The ongoing debate of what separates magic from religion, for example, is frequently supported by a definition of Greek religion as civic religion.³⁶ The much-debated question of the nature and quality of the religious phenomenon referred to as Orphism, in particular of whether Orphism constitutes a separate “religious movement”, likewise reflects the difficulties we face when we try to position these cults as distinct from mainstream Greek religion.³⁷ To situate such cults and practices strictly outside Greek religion narrowly defined as polis religion however, as Sourvinou-Inwood suggests, runs the risk of circularity. It marginalises exactly those areas of religious activity which the model cannot sufficiently explain.

The relationship between phenomena like magic, Orphism and Bacchic cults on the one hand and traditional religious beliefs and practices on the other is much more complicated than a simple separation of the religion of the polis from “sectarian movements” might tempt us to assume. To start with, despite their distinct features Orphism, Bacchic cults and magical practices respond to and interact with more widely held beliefs and practices of mainstream Greek religion. The Orphic *Theogony*, for example, is an extension of the Hesiodic genealogy of the gods. It expands Hesiod’s theogony by adding two predecessors, Night and Protogonos, to the first king Ouranos and extends its end with the reign of Dionysos.³⁸ The result is a reorganisation of the Greek pantheon, but a reorganisation that takes the traditional model as its point of departure.³⁹

³⁵ SOURVINOU-INWOOD (2000a), (1990), p. 20.

³⁶ The literature on this question is vast. The debate goes all the way back to James Frazer’s (now refuted) distinction between magic and religion as one of coercion and submission. Some of the more productive recent contributions to this debate can be found in FARAONE & OBBINK (1991), VERSNEL (1991), BREMMER (1999). A comprehensive introduction to ancient magic and the debates surrounding it can be found in GRAF (1997).

³⁷ The literature on this and other aspects of Orphism is considerable. The old position that sees Orphism as a separate religious movement originated with ROHDE (1894) and was further advocated by GUTHRIE (1935) and NILSSON (1935) amongst others. This position was successfully refuted by LINFORTH (1941), ZUNTZ (1971), BURKERT (1977), p. 1-10. WEST (1983), p. 1 refers to it as the “pseudo-problem of the supposed Orphic religion”. The debate is nicely summarized by PARKER (1995), who advocates the cautious middle-position prevailing in current scholarship and who concludes that “the question about the unity of Orphism must be left unanswered.” (p. 487).

³⁸ PARKER (1995), p. 487-496.

³⁹ On the relationship between Orphic to Hesiodic theogony see GUTHRIE (1935), p. 83-84. See also EDMONDS (2004), p. 75-80 amongst others.

Recent research has stressed that Greek magical practices also overlapped significantly with traditional religion. A look at the *Papyri Graecae Magicae*, for example reveals the closeness of magical formulae to Greek prayer.⁴⁰ And both concepts refer to similar notions of the supernatural. In particular, if we consider religious beliefs as they come together in the minds of those involved in them, a strict distinction between sectarian movements, magic and traditional religion becomes problematic.

Strict distinction between both types of religious activity becomes even more untenable if we consider that those involved in magic, Orphism and other “unauthorized” or “elective” cults were not recruited from socially or politically marginal groups. As Stephen Halliwell has recently pointed out “membership in some kinds of separate religious groups could coexist with involvement in more ‘mainstream’ forms of Greek religion, and still more with full participation in communal life.”⁴¹ To equate religious marginality with social marginality is “a simplification of the nature of (Greek) religion itself”.⁴² Some of the Orphic gold tablets were found in the tombs of relatively affluent and hence socially accepted members of society.⁴³ Likewise, those engaged in polis religion were the same people who would in specific circumstances resort to magic.⁴⁴ Religious phenomena, such as magic, Orphism and Bacchic cults remain deeply embedded in the cities’ socio-political and normative structures.

Some of the most productive current work therefore focuses on the relationship between “unauthorised” religious beliefs and practices and the city without simplifying either entity as closed and monolithic.⁴⁵ For example, in an article exploring the relationship between representations of maenadism in Greek tragedy and art, particularly on vases, Robin Osborne has argued convincingly that during the fifth century BC, ecstatic female worship of Dionysos was an accepted part of Athenian religious experience and not a unique and unusual feature.⁴⁶ From this point of view, the *Bacchae* of Euripides “is not helping Athenians to come to terms with the alien but helping them to see just how shocking were the rituals to which they were so accustomed.”⁴⁷

The notion of “thin coherence” might provide an invaluable framework for this and other areas of study investigating the unity and diversity of Greek religious discourse. It is the diversity of Greek religious beliefs and practices in particular that compose the fabric of Greek polytheism. Thin coherence might

⁴⁰ On the overlap between prayer and magic see GRAF (1991).

⁴¹ HALLIWELL (2005).

⁴² HALLIWELL (2005).

⁴³ See PARKER (1995), p. 496.

⁴⁴ See GRAF (1999), p. 1-2.

⁴⁵ See for example EDMONDS (2004).

⁴⁶ OSBORNE (1997). See also VERNANT (1990), HENRICHS (1990).

⁴⁷ OSBORNE (1997), p. 115.

therefore offer conceptual guidance in further developing a framework for researching religious identities that both are and are not like polis religion without overemphasising similarities or differences between religious phenomena. To explain away existing inconsistencies is more dogmatic than the religion we seek to explain.

However, at this stage, we must include a caveat: the study of inconsistencies is fruitful only when it is itself “embedded” (along the lines suggested by Ober, for example) in a wider framework of perspectives exploring the nature of different – even divergent – belief systems within the wider, general culture. The simple presentation of inconsistencies cannot be heuristically satisfying as we cannot be sure that what we are dealing with is more than just our failure to see coherence. The only way to distinguish, to some extent at least, our own failure to understand from true plurality of belief is to place such dissonances within a larger framework of cultural contestation.

3.3. Greek Religion: the Local and the General

Classical scholars have extended the notion of the polis as a closed hermeneutic system from the individual polis, to the “world of the polis” system and beyond, to the panhellenic dimension of Greek religion. As a result, many general introductions to ancient Greek religion show an intrinsic and ultimately unresolvable tension between local religious beliefs and practices and Greek religion more broadly. In such works the local is always implied as the conceptual antipode to a more general, more typical, less idiosyncratic layer of Greek religion and vice versa. Unfortunately, however, despite the heavy weight they are made to carry, both concepts remain largely undefined in current scholarship.⁴⁸

Take for example Walter Burkert’s description of the Greek gods in *Greek Religion*. His account of Aphrodite is a description of her typical representations and areas of competence as the goddess of love and sexuality.⁴⁹ Local variations are mostly used to illuminate such general features. The appearance of pictorial representations of Aphrodite dressed in wide robes and wearing the *polos* in the first half of the seventh century BC is welcomed by Burkert as the “normal representation of the goddess” that superseded the orientализing nude figure.⁵⁰ What motivated this change? In what pictorial and religious local contexts do these “normal representations” of the goddess appear, hence assigning them a special meaning? Such questions do not feature in Burkert’s account. Likewise,

⁴⁸ See for example SOURVINOU-INWOOD (1978).

⁴⁹ BURKERT (1985), p. 152-156. See PIRONTI (2007) for a strong argument against the monolithic vision of Aphrodite as “goddess of love”.

⁵⁰ BURKERT (1985), p. 155.

the depiction of the nude Aphrodite about to take a bath, crafted by Praxiteles around 340 BC for the sanctuary at Cnidos, is mentioned only in passing to introduce the general popularity of this theme in later times: “for centuries this figure remained the most renowned representation of the goddess of love, the embodiment of all womanly charms.”⁵¹ The circumstances, which explain this change in representation as well as the contexts in which this statue features at Cnidos, remain unexplored. Burkert’s account is driven by the overall aim to bring single local aspects of the Greek pantheon together into one more or less coherent narrative of ancient Greek religion.⁵² Similar observations could be made concerning the way in which Burkert and other scholars deal with forms of *epikleseis*, divinatory rituals and initiation procedures that are specific to a given polis. The rituals that do not conform to a standard model of Greek religion are sidelined in such accounts. The consistency of Greek religion seems to be merely an observation of the similarity evident once sufficient local variations are stripped away.

In *Religions of the Ancient Greeks*, Simon Price addresses this problem directly: “I have tried ... to examine local practices and myths and their relationship to the common Greek system.”⁵³ His chapter on *Gods, Myths and Festivals* is typical of his overall approach.⁵⁴ The chapter attempts to distinguish panhellenic from local myths; both are dealt with in two separate subsections. There is, however, a tension between both concepts (which are never defined) that runs deeply through both sections. In his account of Panhellenic myth, for example, Price stresses that, despite the preference of Homer and Hesiod, there was no single authoritative version of a myth. He advocates the need to respect individual tellings: “Given that the Greek myths were not rigid, it is methodologically very important that we respect the individual telling or representation of the myths. It is absurd to weave together a compendium of Greek mythology from extracts in different authors.”⁵⁵ This is certainly correct. At the same time, however, we must ask in how far it then makes sense at all to strictly distinguish between both categories. If individual tellings of myth are paramount what justifies the distinction of a general Panhellenic layer of Greek mythology?

Curiously, for example, the iconography of the altar of Zeus and Hera at Pergamon in Asia Minor features as an example for panhellenic myth,

⁵¹ BURKERT (1985), p. 155.

⁵² See Burkert’s justification of this approach in BURKERT (1985), p. 8: “Would it not be correct to speak in the plural of Greek religions? Against this must be set the bond of common language and, from the eighth century onwards the common Homeric literature... in spite of an emphasis on local or sectarian peculiarities, the Greeks themselves regarded the various manifestations of their religious life as essentially compatible, as a diversity of practice in devotion to the same gods, within the framework of a single world.”

⁵³ PRICE (1999), p. IX.

⁵⁴ PRICE (1999), p. 11-46, see in particular p. 11-25.

⁵⁵ PRICE (1999), p. 15.

apparently because it highlights Hesiodic thought.⁵⁶ Here and elsewhere, Price's use of both categories is somewhat confusing. A panhellenic myth seems to mean merely a story that features in the authoritative accounts of Homer and Hesiod and/or has no immediate local references. But this distinction proves ever more troubling and it is not always clear why his examples should be subsumed in either section. In his concluding section he states: "Some local myths did not simply invoke Panhellenic deities in actions affecting particular communities, they offered a refraction of the Panhellenic deity through the lens of local concerns. For Greek gods existed at both, the Panhellenic and the local level, and the Panhellenic structures of the pantheon varied with different local selections and emphases."⁵⁷ This point is of course well taken. Yet in his endeavour to highlight both diversity *and* conformity, there is a real risk to end up doing justice to neither the local nor the general. Until we find a more complex conceptualisation of the fabric of Greek religious beliefs and practices, Greek religion, at least in our general accounts of it, will appear to be less than the sum of its parts.

In this area of scholarly activity, the polis model can provide a viable way around such problems. If fully embraced, the polis model can provide a framework with sufficient flexibility to do justice to the diverse and particularistic nature of the Greek world. In particular, the focus on the specificity of individual poleis, a central tenet of the model of polis religion, can help correct simplifying assumptions concerning the unity of ancient Greek religion. It is thus one of the model's strengths that it is able to embrace the plurality of Greek religious beliefs and practices in a manner that moves significantly beyond the impasse between local and general layers of ancient Greek religion.

Robert Parker's comprehensive account of the religious life of just one individual polis provides a good example of a productive use of the polis model in this way.⁵⁸ Two of his works are entirely devoted to Athens and offer a thorough investigation of religious practices of different social groups such as the *demes* and *phratries* by themselves and in their interaction with each other. In Parker's work the local is not conceptualised as the (always implied) conceptual antipode of Greek religion as such, but functions rather as its own self-contained unit of investigation. It may be inferred from Parker's study of Athenian religion that in some ways all of Greek religion is local religion.

Starting from Parker's work, there is, however, a real need to move beyond the well-known case of Athens. After all, the Greek world consisted, according to a recent count by Hansen, of at least 1035 individual poleis.⁵⁹ From the point

⁵⁶ PRICE (1999), p. 13.

⁵⁷ PRICE (1999), p. 23-24.

⁵⁸ See PARKER (1996), (2005).

⁵⁹ HANSEN & NIELSEN (2004).

of view of local cults and their sometimes problematic relationship to the larger system of Greek polis religion, it is unfortunate that the *Copenhagen Polis Centre* has largely excluded the religious dimension from its inventory of the poleis.⁶⁰ The Centre's recently published account includes selective and uneven information about religious practice in the individual poleis and largely ignores religious institutions situated above or below the polis level.⁶¹ A more comprehensive assessment of cults and sanctuaries would have provided an invaluable way into the study of the religion of individual poleis.

The model of polis religion can and should locate each local cult within the religious system of its own polis. This, in turn, opens up a variety of directions for future research. Other questions can and have been asked. Beate Dignas, for example, has investigated the relationship of polis religion to the local economy.⁶² The debate surrounding de Polignac's controversial thesis concerning the role of religion in the formation of the polis during the Archaic period has also inspired a variety of studies investigating the role of polis religion in community and state-building in different parts of the Greek world (more on this below).⁶³

3.4. Developments Beyond the Classical Period

During the Hellenistic and Roman periods, the “world-of-the-polis system” underwent profound changes and was gradually subsumed under new administrative and political structures. These structures were not rooted in the polis. In addition, new forms of religious beliefs and practices were introduced, such as worship of the emperor, and exotic cults like those of Isis and Sarapis. These new forms of worship took their legitimacy and their binding force from contexts of social and political life beyond the polis.

With such differences in mind, most works on Greek religion based on the model of polis religion have focused on the Archaic and Classical periods.⁶⁴ Despite the fundamental changes in the religious landscape between the 8th and

⁶⁰ In his original outline of the Centre's aims and objectives, Hansen had explicitly stated that it was the Centre's goal to give a secular rather than a religious account of the poleis (see HANSEN [1994], p. 13-14). Given that the Greeks made no strict differentiation between sacred and profane – at least not in the way in which this dichotomy is conceptualised in modern society, see BREMMER (1998), – this self-imposed limitation seems artificial.

⁶¹ These omissions reflect both publishing restrictions and the disagreement of its main editors with the claim, made by de Polignac and others, that religion (rather than politics) was at the centre of the polis. See HANSEN & NIELSEN (2004), p. 130-134.

⁶² DIGNAS (2002).

⁶³ DE POLIGNAC (1991). A good collection of articles representing the major debates in the reception of de Polignac is in ALCOCK & OSBORNE (1994).

⁶⁴ See for example BURKERT (1985), BRUIT ZAIDMAN & SCHMITT PANTEL (1992), BREMMER (1994).

4th centuries BC, these periods are frequently constructed as a uniform epoch in which time can be ignored in favour of a “mutually sustaining universe of unchanging meaning”.⁶⁵ But the model of polis religion has become so powerful that even works covering later periods frequently rely implicitly or explicitly on the definition of Greek religion as polis religion. The result is either an overemphasis on continuities in religious beliefs and practices or the acknowledgement of differences – without, however, attempting to ground these differences in a more comprehensive account of Greek religion during the Hellenistic and Roman periods.⁶⁶ We still lack, for example, a comprehensive work on Hellenistic religion which strikes a subtle balance between continuity and change.⁶⁷

In this respect Parker’s two-volume work on Athenian religion can serve as an example of the difficulty of navigating around the anti-historicist tendencies that are so widespread in studies based on the model of polis religion. In contrast to the work of Bruit Zaidman and Schmitt Pantel, which is structured entirely thematically, Parker’s recognizes the need to include both perspectives.⁶⁸ His first volume is explicitly entitled *Athenian Religion: A History*.⁶⁹ This chronological study of the polis religion of Athens is supplemented by a second volume, which is thematically organised.⁷⁰

However, Parker’s decision to split his account into separate volumes reflects and ultimately embodies the difficulty of the model to combine synchronic and diachronic perspectives. The real challenge would have been to

⁶⁵ See Sewell’s brilliant definition of synchronic analysis, which according to Sewell, rather than offering a series of snapshots, constructs its referent as a “uniform moment or epoch” in which “different times are present in a continuous moment.” SEWELL (1997), p. 40.

⁶⁶ A good example is GRIFFITH (2005) who describes the elements of Hellenistic Religion but fails to ground them in a more comprehensive account of Greek religion of the Hellenistic period. An outline of the guiding principles of such an account can be found in GORDON (1972). Gordon introduces the term ‘selective continuity’ as a programmatic term for his nuanced discussion of Hellenistic religious beliefs and practices between continuity and change. See also the dualistic categories of ‘locative’ vs. ‘utopian’ cultures that Jonathan Z. Smith developed in order to differentiate Hellenistic from earlier styles of religion: see SMITH (1993), p. 88-3, p. 129-147.

⁶⁷ Despite its strong chronological focus, MIKALSON (1998) provides a worthwhile case-study for Hellenistic Athens, paying particular attention to the balancing of the needs of the individual and society. A comprehensive study of Hellenistic religion, however, should integrate the evidence for Athens with that for other areas of the Hellenistic world, as the religious outlook of the time varied significantly and depended on factors such as geographical location and social class: see GORDON (1972). PAKKANEN (1996) offers a re-evaluation of four key concepts of Hellenistic religion (syncretism, the trend towards monotheism, individualism and cosmopolitanism) by investigating the mysteries of Demeter and the cult of Isis in early Hellenistic Athens. On select aspects of Hellenistic religion see also CORRINGTON (1986), SØRENSEN (1989), MENDELS (1998).

⁶⁸ BRUIT ZAIDMAN & SCHMITT PANTEL (1992), PARKER (1996).

⁶⁹ PARKER (1996).

⁷⁰ PARKER (2005).

combine both perspectives in a dialectical, mutually reinforcing fashion. Just as the synchronic perspective is at the heart of cultural analysis, it needs to be in direct communication with the diachronic perspective, since it reveals the very processes which shape and are shaped by it.⁷¹ For a diachronic account to go beyond providing only a “thin” narration of the particulars of change over time it must be grounded simultaneously in “thick” synchronic analysis. To achieve such an active oscillation between the two perspectives, however, would have required Parker to establish more explicit links between the material presented in both volumes by giving up the two-volume structure in favour of a more dialectical account of continuity and change. The arbitrariness with which much of the material is distributed between the two books reveals how artificial and foreign the two-volume structure adopted is to the data discussed. As a result, Parker is ultimately unable to connect structure with agency – despite the detail and analytical rigor that distinguish his work.⁷²

3.5. Religious Ideas vs. Religious Practice

Scholars working with the model of polis religion focus strongly on religious agency while largely excluding religious beliefs from their accounts of Greek religion.⁷³ Although Sourvinou-Inwood hoped to have “proposed certain reconstructions of ancient religious perceptions pertaining especially to the articulation of polis religion”, beliefs do not feature in her definition of polis religion.⁷⁴

The model of polis religion was successful in helping us analyse religious practice, because of its “embeddedness” in the polis, since human agency (at least during Archaic and Classical times) always refers in one way or the other to the polis. Pauline Schmitt Pantel’s *La cité au banquet* may serve as an example of the kind of questions asked within the framework of polis religion: her book is a comprehensive investigation of the role of conviviality as a religious, social and political institution in the formulation of identities within the Archaic and Classical Greek poleis.⁷⁵ Other works demonstrate the close link between

⁷¹ See William Sewall’s excellent observations on the relationship between synchronic and diachronic perspectives in the writing of social history. SEWELL (1997), in particular p. 39–42.

⁷² A good example of how diachronic change could fit into the religious landscape of Greece is characteristic of the work of another eminent scholar of Greek religion – Michael Jameson. He sketches a subtle and multi-faceted framework of religious innovation, thus giving a balanced account of continuity and change in Athenian religious practice during the transition from the Archaic to the Classical period (see for example JAMESON [1997]).

⁷³ See for example JAMESON (1997), who focuses mainly on ritual and leaves out religious beliefs almost entirely. Thanks again to Jan Bremmer for pointing this out to me.

⁷⁴ SOURVINOU-INWOOD (2000a [1990]), p. 37.

⁷⁵ SCHMITT PANTEL (1992).

religion and power in pagan priesthood or depict the introduction of new gods as a powerful tool to achieve social and political change.⁷⁶

The neglect of religious beliefs came at a high price, however. In an attempt to distinguish one's own work as much as possible from the earlier associative studies of Greek religious beliefs, it became desirable to draw a somewhat artificial line between religious beliefs on the one hand and polis-oriented religious practice on the other. Walter Burkert, for example, concludes his argument about the existence of a Greek religion beyond the polis by pointing out that "... there were no attempts of a polis to influence 'belief,' a concept which hardly exists in practical Greek religion. It was Wilamowitz who wrote *Der Glaube der Hellenen*."⁷⁷

However, it was Burkert who wrote *Homo Necans*, a work that assigned a central role to the deep-seated meaning of blood sacrifice. Against this background it is curious that he makes so strict a distinction between religious beliefs and practices. In the statement quoted above, religious belief is divorced from religious practice and becomes a product of modern rather than ancient imagination. While this might have been true for the earlier unreflected theology of Harrison, Cornford or Murray, it is certainly less correct for the reconstruction of Greek religious beliefs and practices that carefully reflects on its own premises. In addition, to note that the polis did not try to influence belief and that belief was absent from "practical Greek religion" is to state that to believe and to act are two fundamentally separate activities. Belief and practice may in theory be separate; but they may also be causally related. Belief informs practice just as much as practice informs belief. To return to Burkert's example: the practice of Greek blood sacrifice cannot properly be understood without taking into account a variety of beliefs that feed into this practice. These include, but are not limited to, Greek notions about the gods and their reciprocal relationship with humanity and Greek ideas about sacrificial purity and the special status of blood. Even if Burkert himself did not cast the problem in this way, there is now a growing scholarly trend to bring the category of "belief" more firmly into the picture.⁷⁸

3.6. 'Beyond the Polis' in the Other Direction – The Look from the Polis Level Up

Finally, in discussing the potential and the limits of the polis model, it is important not only to 'look down' from the level of the polis and to focus on the reluctance of the model to address issues of personal belief, etc., as I have

⁷⁶ BEARD & NORTH (1990), GARLAND (1992).

⁷⁷ BURKERT (1995), p. 205.

⁷⁸ See for example DIORGANO-ZECHARYA (2005) with further bibliography.

done in the sections above. It is equally pressing and valid to ‘look up’ from the level of the polis to religious practices not contained by or articulated within the polis context.

When it was first published in 1984 Francois de Polignac’s influential study *Naissance de la cité grecque* (published in English as *Cults, Territory and the Origin of the Greek City State*) triggered a widespread debate concerning the links between religious identity and polis identity. De Polignac’s claim that the city came to define itself first and foremost as a religious community inspired various case studies further exploring the religious landscape of Greece as a bipolar geometrical plane, in which the city was shaped in a dynamic tension between centre and periphery. In the larger picture of studies on ancient Greek religion, de Polignac’s pointed formulation represented a broader trend that tended to overemphasize the role of the polis as the main organising principle of Greek cultural practices including, but not limited to, religion. Other socio-political units besides the polis, such as the *ethne*, were seen as remnants in a larger evolutionary scheme that culminated in the polis.⁷⁹ As a result, the existence of alternative worshipping communities and individual religious practices outside the framework of the polis has been neglected by the model of polis religion just as much as personal issues of belief during the Classical and Hellenistic periods.

In response to de Polignac’s simplifying yet through-provoking claim, classical scholars have recently sought to draw a more complicated picture of religious transformation. The critical discussion of his work induced de Polignac himself to give up strictly bipolar synchronicity in favour of a more chronologically and geographically nuanced picture.⁸⁰ His most recent work on Greek sanctuaries and festivals during the archaic period, emphasizes the necessity to work with multiple frameworks if we want to understand ancient Greek religion:

The role of sanctuaries and festivals in archaic Greece cannot be analyzed either by isolating one element, or by general categorizations determined by rigid and constant parameters... It should rather be seen as a system in which the meaning of each element is determined by complex interactions with other components, combining long-lasting religious conceptions and rapid shifts in cult practices and organization. Sanctuaries are certainly among the places where the extraordinary vitality and inventiveness of archaic Greece are at their most visible.⁸¹

⁷⁹ See for example MCINNERY (1999), p. 1-7, who argues that the focus on the polis has led to the scholarly neglect of ethnic identity.

⁸⁰ DE POLIGNAC (2009). See also the changes de Polignac made in the English edition of his work and in DE POLIGNAC (1995).

⁸¹ DE POLIGNAC (2009), 442.

Poststructuralist notions of religious signification seem to have superseded the structuralist conception of the Greek sacred landscape.

The larger significance of this debate for scholarship on Greek religion certainly lies in its re-evaluation of the role of the polis in relation to other units of collective identity. The prevailing view now seems to be that the polis did not so much replace older identities as offer an alternative model, which continued to co-exist with other forms of identity and organization. Accordingly, recent works in the field stress that the coming of the polis (in itself by no means a chronologically identifiable “event”) is just one episode in a much longer history of religious transformation. This change of focus enables a more differentiated perspective, which takes into account alternative worshipping communities that continued to exist besides the polis during the Iron Age, the Archaic and later periods.

Catherine Morgan, for example, has suggested that we complicate our picture of Early Iron Age and Archaic cult practice in various ways.⁸² She advocates a more nuanced chronological investigation of how the development of the polis did and did not affect early Greek cult activity. Drawing in particular on material remains from the margins of the emerging polis-world (Thessaly, Phokis, East Lokris, Achaia and Arcadia), Morgan revises widespread notions in scholarship that were primarily based on the cases of large and central poleis, such as Athens, Sparta and Argos which were atypical in many ways.⁸³ For the region of Thessaly, for example, Morgan has traced an interesting development in which a local Early Iron Age cult of Enodia gradually turned into a pan-Thessalian deity identified with the Olympic divinity of Zeus Thaulios.⁸⁴ Pointing in particular at the existence of *ethnos* sanctuaries in this and other territories, Morgan concludes that “the priority accorded to the polis ... as the most dynamic, creative and influential form of political organization is no longer sustainable.”⁸⁵ In several archaeological case studies Alexandros Mazarakis Ainian has come to a similar conclusion.⁸⁶ Most notably, perhaps, in his rich and comprehensive investigation of the genesis of the Greek temple between the 11th and the 8th centuries BC, Mazarakis Ainian has variously pointed to the existence of other worshipping communities above and below the polis level: “The worship of the gods could be carried out on various levels of the society’s structure: it could be a matter of the initiative of a single individual, of a household, of one or more kinship groups, of the polis or even of a confederation of poleis. Before the creation of the polis, however, cult

⁸² See for example MORGAN (1994), (2003).

⁸³ See MORGAN (2003).

⁸⁴ MORGAN (2003), p. 135-155.

⁸⁵ MORGAN (2003), p. 6.

⁸⁶ See for example MAZARAKIS AINIAN (1985), (1988).

practice would have been either a matter of private initiative of an individual or a household, or that of a kinship group.”⁸⁷

The picture that emerges from such research suggests that from about 700 BC onwards, the polis provided an important organising principle of Greek religious beliefs and practices. At the same time Greek religion remained a vehicle for the communication of other, larger identities, most notably that of ethnic identity.⁸⁸ For the late Archaic, Classical and Hellenistic periods, there is plenty of evidence of ritual activity administered by the *ethne*, not the poleis. An inscription dating from around 216 BC, for example, testifies the transfer of a sanctuary with an important festival from the city of Anactorium in North-western Greece to the Acarnanian league.⁸⁹ During the Hellenistic Period then, this sanctuary served as a symbolic centre of the league, distinct from its political centre, which remained on Leucas.⁹⁰ A treaty dating from around 300 BC, likewise attests to religious practices administered by the *ethne*: the sanctuary of Athena Itonia served as the centre of the Boeotian *ethnos*; the *Pamboiotia*, special Boeotian games held in honour of Athena Itonia, were held in Koroneia even before that time.⁹¹ As well as *ethnos* cults, there were, of course, also several religious institutions, in particular large and important sanctuaries, that were administered by amphictionies. These leagues of several poleis (such as the Panionian amphictiony which looked after a common Poseidon sanctuary located on the semi-island of Mycale) provide another example of Greek religious structures situated beyond the polis.⁹²

4. Conclusion

There is, of course, no single approach, that either can or should supersede the polis model. The model’s strength lies in its capacity to explain an important structuring principle of ancient Greek religion. For a religion that lacked the organizational structures characteristic of most modern religions, such as a church, a creed and a dogma, it offers an alternative concept of religious administration and signification. Most notably, perhaps, if fully embraced, the model of polis religion helps us to move away from generalizing assumptions about the nature of “Greek religion as such” and encourages us to pay closer attention to the fabric of Greek religion as an agglomeration of “local” variants.

⁸⁷ MAZARAKIS AINIAN (1997), p. 393.

⁸⁸ See for example HALL (1997), MORGAN (2003), FREITAG, FUNKE & HAAKE (2006).

⁸⁹ IG IX² 1, 3; 207.

⁹⁰ See PARKER (1998), p. 27. Parker includes a special appendix, listing evidence for various religious practices among the *ethne*.

⁹¹ See PARKER (1997), p. 30, BUCK (1979), p. 88-90, SCHACHTER (1981), p. 117-127.

⁹² On this and other amphictionies see TAUSEND (1992), in particular p. 55-57.

The weaknesses of the model, however, spring from its too narrow and problematic promotion on the polis as the primary discourse of power relevant for the study of ancient Greek religion. To start with, the model of polis religion in some forms and formulations renders Greek religion less comprehensible than it ought to be. There is, for example, a certain conceptual vagueness in works based on the polis model concerning the nature of the embeddedness of Greek religion in the polis. The exact quality of the relationship between religious structures and socio-political structures remains under-theorized in many works based on the model. Diverging claims range from the symbolic (or ideological) embeddedness to a more practice-oriented “embeddedness” of Greek religion in the polis (see above). One result of this is that scholarly accounts oscillate between the depiction of religion as a mainly passive force within society (mapping onto the reach of polis institutions) to the depiction of a more active role of religion at the other. Both perspectives, however, assume that the structured (systematic) character of Greek religion ran parallel to the political and social structures of the polis. This assumption frequently results in a focus on synchronic coherence and consistency. Under such a paradigm local differences and diachronic change are conceived merely as an inversion of existing structures – or, worse, as deviation and decline from “proper” Greek religion.

In addition, the model does not ask all the questions one might wish about Greek religion. While the polis model is able to explain the official response to religious activity it does not necessarily provide a key to understanding the appeal of this activity from the point of view of those involved in it.⁹³ Nor does the focus on the mediation of the polis help us to appreciate the religion of alternative socio-political units above and below the polis level.⁹⁴ In particular the strong focus on religious practices combined with the relative neglect of religious beliefs is a serious limitation of current scholarship in the field.

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⁹³ To use an example from Roman religion: scholars working with the polis model would point out that the Bacchanalia scandal of 186 demonstrates the power of the polis (of Rome) to suppress religious activity that it perceived to be against its interests. This offers an explanation of the political dimension of this scandal. It does not, however, explain the appeal of this mystery religion to the individual believer both male and female.

⁹⁴ See WOOLF (1997), p. 77-82.

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