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## PERSONAL RELIGION: A PRODUCTIVE CATEGORY FOR THE STUDY OF ANCIENT GREEK RELIGION?

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**Abstract:** This article investigates the scope and meaning of ancient Greek personal religion as an additional dimension – besides official (*polis*) religion – in which the ancient Greek religious experience articulates itself. I show how ‘personal religion’ is a rather broad and amorphous scholarly category for a number of religious beliefs and practices that, in reflecting individual engagement with the supernatural, do not fit into our conception of *polis* religion. At the same time, I argue that personal religion should not be seen simply as that which is not official Greek religion. Nor is personal religion simply ‘private’ religion, *oikos* religion or the religion of those who had no voice in the sphere of politics (metics, women). Rather, ‘personal religion’ combines aspects of public and private. It is a productive category of scholarly research insofar as it helps us to appreciate the whole spectrum of ways individuals in the ancient Greek city received and (if necessary) altered culturally given religious beliefs and practices. Indeed, the examples discussed in this paper reveal a very Greek conversation about the question of what should count as a religious sign and who was to determine its meaning.

**Keywords:** ancient Greek religion, ‘*polis* religion’, personal religion, individual and society

### I. Introduction

A look at the numerous introductions to and handbooks on ancient Greek religion may leave the uninitiated reader slightly puzzled: while there is much information on communal religious practices such as festivals, cults and sacrificial rituals, there is considerably less on personal religion and on the individual as the ‘basic unit’ of the ancient Greek religious experience. Did the Greeks know no personal engagement with the supernatural, in contrast to, let’s say, Judaism and Christianity, in which considerable weight is put on the individual believer?<sup>1</sup>

Traditionally, much classical scholarship would have argued exactly that. Simon Price is a case in point. He states that ‘[p]ractice not belief is the key, and to start from questions about faith or *personal piety* is to impose alien values on ancient Greece’.<sup>2</sup> I have argued elsewhere that this statement should not be taken out of context and that Price here merely asserts the alien nature of ancient Greek religion and the inadequacy of categories derived from other religious traditions, most notably perhaps from Christianity.<sup>3</sup> Yet the decisiveness with which he positions himself against the existence of ‘personal piety’ is not uncommon in scholarship in the field. His views are representative of a number of studies which have paid little, if any, attention to the existence of personal religion in their accounts of ancient Greek religion.<sup>4</sup> They are ultimately due to a broader scholarly position which defines ancient Greek religion in a way that downplays the dimensions of ‘belief’ and ‘personal piety’ in favour of communal articulations of the religious – collective ritual practices in particular.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Albertz (1978).

<sup>2</sup> Price (1999) 3 (my emphasis).

<sup>3</sup> Kindt (forthcoming a).

<sup>4</sup> For example Burkert (1985); Ogden (2007); Evans (2010).

The reason for this is that much scholarship since the 1940s and 1950s has focused on what students of Roman religion have referred to as ‘civic religion’ and what in the Greek context is called ‘*polis* religion’. In *Rethinking Greek Religion* I suggest that in much current scholarship there is a distinct focus on official and collective religious practices organized and controlled by the ancient Greek city and its social and political institutions – practices which are frequently also taken to be representative of the collective identities within and of the *polis*.<sup>5</sup> In many ways, Walter Burkert’s observation that ‘Greek religion, bound to the *polis*, is public religion to an extreme degree’, articulated so prominently in his book *Greek Religion* (1985, German original 1977), is one with which many scholars working in the field would still agree.<sup>6</sup>

Only during the last decade and a half has ‘personal religion’ emerged on the radar of classical scholarship as another dimension in which the ancient Greek religious experience articulated itself. While the early pioneering works in this area by André-Jean Festugière and Martin P. Nilsson did not lead to a broader interest in and recognition of personal religion, a number of studies have now drawn our attention to aspects of ancient Greek religion that, in reflecting a more personal engagement with the supernatural, fall fully or partially outside the *polis* paradigm.<sup>7</sup> Research on personal oracle consultations, epiphanic experiences and the production, circulation and use of Greek religious artefacts (such as votive offerings, funerary stelae, amulets), for example, has illustrated how personal concerns that did not involve *polis* issues shaped engagement with the supernatural.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, the re-evaluation of so-called ‘magical practices’ and ‘mystery cults’, in particular the renewed interest in Orphism emerging in the wake of the publication of the Derveni Papyrus, has shown that these religious phenomena should not be defined as being outside ancient Greek religion.<sup>9</sup> Rather, they were important manifestations of the religious in ancient Greece, which also reflect a personal engagement with the supernatural. Finally, the still emerging research on the religion of the *oikos* (‘household’) has further contributed to our awareness of alternative locations of the religious besides those offered by and on behalf of the *polis* and its institutions.<sup>10</sup>

A number of scholarly articles and book chapters address these and other aspects of ‘personal religion’ in a particular context: they will be discussed in more detail below.<sup>11</sup> However, the most explicit expression of this new interest in Greek ‘personal religion’ to date is perhaps Stephen Instone’s volume *Greek Personal Religion: A Reader*, a collection of sources with commentary.<sup>12</sup> Instone’s textbook covers a wide range of evidence from individual experiences of epiphany in Homer and the religious views of Hesiod to those articulated by the Greek philosophers and in the Orphic gold tablets. Unfortunately, Instone did not have the chance to extrapolate in detail what brings his different examples together (his book was published posthumously) beyond the general observation in the introduction that “[p]ersonal” in the title is intended to make a contrast with civic or *polis* religion’.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>5</sup> For an extensive discussion of ‘*polis* religion’, see Kindt (2012).

<sup>6</sup> Burkert (1985) 276 (cited by Instone (2009) 1).

<sup>7</sup> Festugière (1954); Nilsson (1972). Faraone (2008) 210 explains their limited success with the fact that they are indebted to now outdated teleological views about ancient Greek religion.

<sup>8</sup> Personal oracle consultations: for example Parke and Wormell (1956) 1.393–415; Fontenrose (1978) 24–35 (see ‘*Res Domesticae et Profanae*’); Lhôte (2006) 24–25; Eidinow (2007) 42–55; Kindt (2012) 36–54. Epiphany: for example Instone (2009) 8–11 (referring to Hom. *Il.* 1.188–222), Platt (2011). Religious artefacts: for example van Straten (1981); (1992); Beer (1987); Stears (1995) 123–25; D’Onofrio (1998); Gebhard (1998); Jacquemin (1998); Kron (1998).

<sup>9</sup> Mystery cults/Orphism/Derveni Papyrus: for example Edmonds (2004); (2011); Graf and Johnston (2013); Instone (2009) 69–82. Curse tablets/‘magical’ practices: for example Instone (2009) 82–85; Gager (1992); Graf (1997) 118–74; Edmonds (2011).

<sup>10</sup> Greek Household/family religion: for example Rose (1957); Garland (1994) 28–30; Boedeker (2008); Faraone (2008); Stowers (2008); Garland (2009) 133–35; Kearns (2010) 152–61; Morgan (2011).

<sup>11</sup> For example Burkert (1998); Jacquemin (1998); Jost (1998); Jourdain-Annequin (1998); Versnel (2011) 133–56; Eckert (2012); Lang (2012); Rubel (2012); Schmitt Pantel (2012).

<sup>12</sup> Instone (2009).

<sup>13</sup> Instone (2009) 1.

Given this growing interest in ‘personal religion’ it is now time to ask what we mean by ‘personal religion’ and how it relates to the religious structures, institutions and systems of authority of official (*polis*) religion. The Greeks themselves did not distinguish between different articulations of the religious along these lines. It has become a commonplace that they did not even have a single word equivalent to our ‘religion’ referring to the sum of religious beliefs and practices. Given that both ‘*polis* religion’ and ‘personal religion’ are scholarly constructs, then, we may ask how helpful they really are in ‘making sense’ of Greek religion. Moreover, in relating ‘personal religion’ to official Greek religion, we may wonder: should we assume that fully separate evocations of the religious are at work here? Are we dealing with complementary or mutually exclusive religious spheres? And, most importantly, are we meant to assume that ancient Greek religion showed a binary structure of public and private religions, of official and personal religions?

To date there is no scholarly article taking a broad view of how ‘personal religion’ has been studied, is studied and could be studied, and synthesizing where we stand with regard to this dimension of the ancient Greek religious experience.<sup>14</sup> This article aims to fill that gap. To this end I explore prevailing scholarly views on Greek personal religion by situating them in the history of scholarship in the field. In *Rethinking Greek Religion* I could only comment in passing on the existence of ancient Greek personal religion as one of several ‘locations’ which *polis* religion cannot (and will not) account for.<sup>15</sup> This article offers an extension of my argument there insofar as it seeks to capture and describe personal religion in more detail in itself and in relation to official Greek religion.

I show that ‘personal religion’ is a rather broad and amorphous scholarly category, the ‘content’ of which has changed over time. Currently it comprises a number of diverse religious beliefs and practices, which do not position themselves with regard to official Greek religion in any consistent way. I therefore argue that personal religion should not simply be set in contrast to official Greek religion. New impulses for the study of Greek personal religion continue to emerge from recent developments in research on ‘public’ and ‘private’. These impulses allow us to bypass the impasse between the traditional focus on official Greek religion and the newer interest in personal religion. It urges us to move beyond the overly rigid distinction between public and private, *polis* and personal religion.

## II. What is personal religion?

What is meant by ‘personal religion’? In the interdisciplinary study of religions, the individual features as a second dimension besides the community around which religions organize themselves.<sup>16</sup> The term itself was originally coined in Egyptology but soon gained currency beyond the context in which it was originally used.<sup>17</sup> In particular, the older ethnography of religion referred to personal articulations of the religious to describe ‘advanced’ cultures in which individuals were able to realize their particular religious needs within a broader societal context. So-called ‘primitive’ societies, in contrast, were characterized by the fact that there was little, if any, scope for the expression of individuality, religious or otherwise.<sup>18</sup>

Even though the distinction between ‘primitive’ and ‘advanced’ societies has long fallen out of fashion, the concept of ‘personal religion’ still exists. In *Religionswissenschaft* (‘the interdisciplinary study of religions’) it describes the way in which culturally-given religious beliefs and practices are realized on the individual level.<sup>19</sup> The idea is that individuals draw on shared religious beliefs and practices and to some extent adopt them; or they may choose to modify and transform

<sup>14</sup> The excellent, yet much more specialized articles by Lang (2012) and Rubel (2012) are not intended to fill this gap.

<sup>15</sup> See Kindt (2012) for example 10, 18, 192.

<sup>16</sup> Here and below, see Stolz (2001) 63–69.

<sup>17</sup> See Erman (1911); Breasted (1912) with Lang (2012) 9–10.

<sup>18</sup> Stolz (2001) 63–69, 139–40.

<sup>19</sup> Stolz (2001) 63–64.

the forms and conventions of communal religious life according to their own personal aims and objectives. Occasionally, in extreme circumstances, individuals may even go against the religious grain of their culture. In this definition, ‘personal religion’ denotes a broad spectrum of ways in which individuals adopt, rethink and at times even invert culturally-given religious beliefs and practices.

Did ancient Greek religion include a personal dimension so defined? And if so, what are the sources that reveal it? The official practice of religion is often visible in the evidence, and we can see that it played a major role in the ancient Greek city. In addition, however, there are a number of sources which show quite clearly how individuals related to the supernatural. These sources also reveal that there was considerable diversity in their religious attitudes and practices.

Take, for example, Plutarch’s essay *Peri Deisidaimonias*, usually translated as *On Superstition*, but perhaps better rendered as *On Dread of the Divine*. The purpose of this text is to show that excessive fear of the supernatural is worse than atheism, because the former evokes bad feelings towards the gods, the latter mere indifference. To this end, Plutarch describes how for some, religious festivals and other ritual celebrations are not the joyous occasion they are for the majority of Greeks:

The pleasantest things that men enjoy are festal days and banquets at the temples, initiations and mystic rites, and prayer and adoration of the gods. Note that the atheist (*ho atheos*) on these occasions gives way to insane and sardonic laughter at such ceremonies, and remarks aside to his cronies that people must cherish a vain and silly conceit to think that these rites are performed in honour of the gods ... On the other hand the superstitious man (*ho deisidaimōn*), much as he desires it, is not able to rejoice or be glad ... When the garland is on his head he turns pale, he offers sacrifice and feels afraid, he prays with quavering voice, with trembling hands he sprinkles incense ...<sup>20</sup>

Of course Plutarch here sketches the religious response of certain character ‘types’ rather than that of particular people. The religion of certain named individuals features elsewhere in his text to support the general depiction of the atheist and the superstitious man.<sup>21</sup> Yet the example nevertheless shows that there was a broad spectrum of ways in which individuals perceived and responded to the very same religious institutions, such as festivals, prayer and sacrifice.

Different ‘uses’ of religious symbols become visible as soon as we consider the spectrum of statuses of supernatural beings which existed in ancient Greek religion that were not entirely fixed in terminology. Besides the Olympians, there were a number of lower gods, divine personifications and other supernatural forces which constituted a culturally given body of supernatural agents that could variously be adapted for personal use. In particular the Greek conception of *daimones*, which always remained under-defined insofar as it encompassed a broad spectrum of beings, partly overlapping with the gods, proved suitable for personal adaptation as Plato’s Socrates attests.<sup>22</sup> He famously found himself accused of not acknowledging the gods of the city and of believing in a personal demonic being (*daimonion*) that spoke to him as an inner voice.<sup>23</sup>

It follows that in the ancient Greek world there was no single belief or practice which *per se* qualified as either personal or civic, individual or official. Libations, incantations, prayers and sacrifices (to name just a few key institutions of ancient Greek religion) are the stuff of *polis* as well as of personal religion. Divination and ritual healing can occur in a publicly approved and managed *polis* context as well as outside of it, for example when it is practised by a *goēs* (magi-

<sup>20</sup> Plu. *Moralia* 169D–E (tr. Babbitt (1928)).

<sup>21</sup> For example Plu. *Moralia* 168F–69C. Plutarch’s depiction of the atheist and the superstitious man reflects the persistence of classical attitudes towards different forms of piety far into the post-classical period.

<sup>22</sup> On the transformations of Greek daimonology over time as well as on various adaptations of the Greek belief in *daimones*, see Sfameni Gasparro (2015).

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Pl. *Ap.*; *X. Ap.*



cian).<sup>24</sup> Whether a given ritual qualifies as ‘personal’ or ‘*polis*’ religion, then, depends on the *context* and *outlook* of those practising it.<sup>25</sup> The ritual practice of cursing, for example, can reflect either a personal setting (as in the writing of *katadesmoi*) or a *polis* setting (as in the collective Teos imprecations).<sup>26</sup>

To evoke the image of religion as a ‘language’ again: those manifestations of the religious referred to as ‘personal’ and as ‘*polis*’ religion are both part of the same symbolic ‘language’ that is ancient Greek religion. They draw on the same grammar and the same vocabulary (Wittgenstein’s famous ‘private language argument’, according to which there is no private religion just as there is no private language, bears heavily here).<sup>27</sup> Yet the same ‘language’ can be used for the expression of different, sometimes even divergent needs. These needs can be personal if they reflect individual aims and objectives; they can also be communal (or even political) when they address shared religious concerns.

### III. Philosophical religion as personal religion

With regard to the sources available for the study of ancient Greek religion, then, the crux of the question is how representative the religious views of a given individual are thought to be. Are the religious beliefs and practices featured in Xenophon’s *Anabasis* distinct from those included in other contemporary sources?<sup>28</sup> Is there, for example, such a thing as ‘the religion’ of Greek tragedy? And what about the religious views expressed by the Hippocratic authors?<sup>29</sup> Are we indeed looking at separate religions, as Simon Price has suggested with regard to the sometimes startling array of evocations of the religious in ancient Greece, or are these merely different incarnations of the same beliefs and practices – variations, as it were, within a given religious system?<sup>30</sup> The question here is whether the individual is putting himself fully or partially outside the prevailing religious system when writing a curse tablet or consulting an oracle about offspring or whether s/he is merely drawing on existing religious structures to articulate a particular position.

That these are indeed pressing questions can be illustrated by considering an area in which ‘personal religion’ has always featured prominently: the religious views of the Greek philosophers. Starting from the Presocratics most if not all ancient Greek philosophical traditions include some reference to divinities. In the manner of abstraction typical of philosophical reasoning, some of these thinkers identified fundamental principles governing the universe with the supernatural. Empedocles, for example, identified Love and Strife as divine forces. In Plato’s *Symposium* we learn (from Diotima) about the divine nature of Love.<sup>31</sup> Such views illustrate not just a tendency to depersonalization in ancient Greek philosophical reasoning; they also reveal a stretch in traditional Greek conceptions of the divine resulting from the need to link religious views (and conceptions of the supernatural bound up with such views) to ethics. How large the scope for personal innovation and variation on the part of the philosophers was in each instance is, of course, a matter of scholarly debate.<sup>32</sup> It will certainly also have changed over time, depending on changes in the ancient Greek political and intellectual landscapes more widely.

<sup>24</sup> Healing and religion/magic: Graf (1997) 30–35; Walker-Ramisch (1999); Nutton (2004) 103–14. Private divination: Gordon (1997).

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Emily Kearns’ chapter on the ‘ritual contexts’ of ancient Greek religion in Kearns (2010) 151–91.

<sup>26</sup> The literature on *katadesmoi* is vast. See, for example, Kindt (2012) 90–122 (with further literature). For the Teos imprecations, see, for example, ML 30, *Syll.*<sup>3</sup> 578 and cp. Plat. *Lg.* 3.684E. Further examples are discussed in *ThesCRA* III.6g (‘malediction’) with refer-

ences to the scholarly literature.

<sup>27</sup> Wittgenstein (1958) sec. 269 with Brenner (1999) 93–98. Thanks to Paul Christ for pointing this out to me.

<sup>28</sup> See Bruit Zaidman (2005).

<sup>29</sup> Temkin (1991); Instone (2009) 57–64.

<sup>30</sup> Price (1999) ix.

<sup>31</sup> Pl. *Smp.* 201D–12A.

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, the opposing positions of Gregory (2013) and Mansfeld and Runia (2009–2010). On this point, see also Benitez (forthcoming).

Again, the culturally-given ‘inventory’ of ancient Greek religion as a symbolic language is certainly present in the religious views of the Greek philosophers (we only need to consider how prominently purification (*katharsis*) features in the writings of some of the most influential of them).<sup>33</sup> When we look at ‘philosophical religion’ we are clearly not dealing with a separate religion but with personal variations of shared religious beliefs and practices; it is therefore not productive to think of ancient Greek religion as consisting of several more or less separate and separable religions. Especially when considering a religious tradition without a central authority (such as a church or a holy text), we should not exclude such ‘personal’ views from the way in which we define and delimit religion.

In ‘Gods cruel and kind: tragic and civic theologies’, Robert Parker uses apparent differences in tragic and civic depictions of the gods as his point of departure to remind us that such inconsistencies are, to some extent, engrained in ancient Greek polytheism and should not simply be explained away.<sup>34</sup> The same applies, I think, to the gods of the Greek philosophers. ‘Philosophical religion’ provides yet another example of a theology which coexisted in the ancient Greek city side-by-side with other representations of the divine, without any apparent attempt to integrate their respective perspectives.

However, this does not mean that the religious views of the philosophers are best considered separately. Indeed, some personal renderings of ancient Greek religion by the Greek philosophers emerge more clearly against the background of mainstream Greek religion, just as our understanding of communal Greek religion can benefit from the way it is perceived by the Greek philosophers. One only has to think how oracles demand critical human examination in the works of Plato to understand that, in the ancient Greek world, the cultural practice of divination is by no means an irrational business.<sup>35</sup> What makes Plato’s representation of Socrates’ dealings with Delphi compelling is precisely the fact that oracles were widely perceived to demand human interpretation by rational means to ‘make sense’.<sup>36</sup> The question, then, is rather how to set the two perspectives (the philosophical and the mainstream one) in relation to each other without using one as the blueprint for the other.

The category of ‘personal religion’, then, helps us to consider philosophical views both by themselves *and* in interaction with mainstream Greek religion.<sup>37</sup> To look at philosophical religion – and intellectual religion more generally – as a form of personal religion, then, offers interesting insights into the nature of ancient Greek religion as such: it allows us to appreciate how in ancient Greece (unlike in other religious traditions) abstract theological speculation about the nature of the divine did not fall into the domain of religious experts. Rather, it was part of the intellectual endeavour of philosophers, doctors, historians and other thinkers.

#### IV. Personal religion, the *oikos* and the *polis*

In the previous sections I suggest that *what* was practised does not clearly differentiate personal from *polis* religion. What about *where* it was practised or *by whom*? It may, for example, be tempting to associate ‘personal religion’ with the religion of the *oikos* (‘household’). The idea here is that the *oikos*, conceived as a private sphere distinct from the demands of the public (*polis*), provided a space for the individual to articulate his or her own religious needs.

<sup>33</sup> For example in Plato (e.g. *Cra.* 396E; *Lg.* 868E; *Phd.* 114C, 243A) and Aristotle (e.g. *Mu.* 401a23; *Pol.* 1342a15).

<sup>34</sup> Parker 1997.

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Plato’s Socrates in *Pl. Ap.* 21A–32B.

<sup>36</sup> See Kindt (forthcoming b).

<sup>37</sup> ‘Philosophical religion’ has been mostly discussed as a closed edifice of ideas, separate from mainstream Greek religion: see, for example, More (1921); Solmsen (1942); Jaeger (1947); Babut (1974); Gerson (1990); McPherran (1996); Drozdek (2007); Fraenkel (2012). If it features at all in general works in the field it is either in a separate chapter or to illustrate certain religious beliefs and practices also found in non-philosophical contexts.

To explain what is problematic about this view we shall consider how *oikos* religion features in the work of Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood – the most succinct formulation of the *polis* paradigm in the study of ancient Greek religion.<sup>38</sup> Sourvinou-Inwood's conception of *polis* religion is based on the idea of the city-state embracing, containing and administering the units of worship below the *polis* level.<sup>39</sup> She states that '[t]he Greek polis articulated religion and was itself articulated by it; religion became the polis' central ideology, structuring, and giving meaning to, all the elements that made up the identity of the polis, its past, its physical landscape'.<sup>40</sup> What is meant by the 'elements' that constitute the *polis* is spelt out a little later in the same article: '[e]ach significant grouping within the *polis* was articulated and given identity through cult. In Greece, all relationships and bonds, including social and political ones, were expressed, and so defined, through cult'.<sup>41</sup> This includes family, *oikos*, deme and *polis* identities as well as typical gender roles and intergenerational relationships: '[t]he polis defined and policed obligations between members of the *oikos*, especially of sons towards parents and grandparents'.<sup>42</sup>

Sourvinou-Inwood propagates a conception of religion as an identity-giving force.<sup>43</sup> It is this function which is at the heart of the conception of ancient Greek religion as *polis* religion. The cohesive force of *polis* religion, however, is not limited to aspects of communal worship; significantly, perhaps, it extends to the relationship between the individual and the larger community of which s/he was part. Sourvinou-Inwood explicitly comments on the role of the individual within the religion of the ancient Greek city.

In my view, *the individual* was without doubt the primary, the basic, cultic unit in polis religion – and not, for example, a small group such as the *oikos* (household). The following arguments make this clear. ... the modalities of individual acts of worship are the same as those of group worship, be that group the polis as a whole or any of the polis subdivisions. This suggests a religious mentality in which the individual's act of worship *is not different in nature* from that of the group's and thus a religious system in which the basic cult units are individuals, who are also grouped in a variety of ways and participate in group cults.<sup>44</sup>

A number of different religious institutions are brought into the picture in support of this view. They include prayer ('personal prayers, it has been argued, have a counterpart in polis prayers'), dedications ('cities as well as individuals made votive offerings to the gods') as well as private sacrifices (whose 'regulations and modalities' were not 'significantly different' from those of official Greek religion).<sup>45</sup> Those scholars who have included the individual in the picture, then, have frequently done so in a way that assumes – as does Sourvinou-Inwood – a fundamental congruence between the principles and practices of 'personal religion' and those of 'civic religion'.<sup>46</sup>

From this point of view the difference between *polis* religion and the religion of other units of worship below it – including the individual as the most basic 'unit' of worship – appears to be one of participation, administration and religious outlook. The rituals of *polis* religion were practised (in principle at least) by all citizens of the ancient Greek city together and not just by certain individuals within the city or by the members of any of its subgroups; they were financed by the *polis*

<sup>38</sup> Sourvinou-Inwood (2000a); (2000b) with Kindt (2012) 12–35.

<sup>39</sup> A conception she shares with Fustel de Coulanges' influential study *The Ancient City* (1956) = *La Cité antique* (1864).

<sup>40</sup> Sourvinou-Inwood (2000a) 22.

<sup>41</sup> Sourvinou-Inwood (2000a) 27.

<sup>42</sup> Sourvinou-Inwood (2000b) 52.

<sup>43</sup> This idea ultimately goes back to Fustel de Coulanges (1956) 127, who already argued that in the

ancient world, religious organization provided a model ('a blueprint') for political organization. It found its most prominent formulation much later and along altogether different lines in de Polignac (1995).

<sup>44</sup> Sourvinou-Inwood (2000b) 46 (my emphases).

<sup>45</sup> Prayer: Sourvinou-Inwood (2000b) 44. Dedications/votive offerings: Sourvinou-Inwood (2000b) 44–45. Sacrifice: Sourvinou-Inwood (2000b) 45.

<sup>46</sup> See, for example, Mikalson (2005) 161.



and ultimately served to secure the welfare of the entire city.<sup>47</sup> Again, there is a fundamental congruence between *polis* religion and the religions of smaller units of worship contained within it, including that of the individual. In other words, there is a quantitative, but not qualitative, difference between *polis* and personal religion.<sup>48</sup>

The idea of a continuum between different units of worship in and of the ancient Greek city has had a profound impact on the study of ancient Greek religion. It has informed the questions scholars have asked about those manifestations of the religious we refer to here as personal religion. To illustrate the identity between *polis* religion and other religions in and of the ancient Greek city, scholars have – rightly – pointed to the manifold ways in which personal, family, *oikos* and *deme* religion extend into the religion of the ancient Greek city. Personal prayer and sacrifices offered by individual citizens are frequently brought into the picture.<sup>49</sup> It has also been pointed out that even the physical space at the heart of *polis* religion, the Greek sanctuary, had a ‘personal’ equivalent in shrines set up by individuals.<sup>50</sup> Finally, it has been argued that the cult of Hestia (Hearth) in the Prytaneion – an important *polis* cult – was itself an extension of family/*oikos* cults, which were also centred upon the Greek household hearth.<sup>51</sup> Such observations have highlighted the many ways in which personal religion mapped onto the religions of the family and household, which, in turn, mapped onto the religion of the city. In scholarly accounts working with such a conception of religion, personal religion becomes fully subsumed into *polis* religion and vice versa. This position explains why personal religion – as a spectrum of ways in which the individual deals with culturally given religious beliefs and practices – does not feature much in many current works on *polis* religion: in these works, all Greek religion *is* personal religion *is polis* religion.

This perspective not only renders both concepts meaningless by making them interchangeable; the notion of a congruence between *polis* and personal religion at the heart of it is also too simple to do justice to the variety of ways in which personal expressions of the religious relate to official Greek religion.

## V. Personal religion, the public and the private

In the wake of an increasing dissatisfaction with the *polis* model for the study of ancient Greek religion and in the historiography of the ancient world more generally, classical scholars have asked new questions about the place of the individual in ancient Greek religion.<sup>52</sup> A number of studies have pointed to the various ways in which personal religion can conflict with communal religious concerns and may even, at least occasionally, go against the principles and practices of *polis* religion. The production and circulation of curse tablets (*defixiones*) – once marginalized as ‘magic’ by the ideology of the city and by classical scholarship (see above) – now emerge as an example of how individuals used religion as a means to an end in situations of personal rivalry and competition.<sup>53</sup> The ritual power of such tablets derives in part at least from the fact that they sometimes invert cultural norms and conventions, for example by writing backwards or enlisting the help of chthonic rather than Olympian divinities. Some scholars have also pointed to various instances in which *polis* institutions (including Greek tragedy) take a direct stance against certain articulations of personal or family religion deemed to be in conflict with *polis* ideology.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>47</sup> See Mikalson (2005) 160.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Faraone’s point on family religion below (n.55).

<sup>49</sup> Personal prayer: for example Kotansky (1991); Versnel (1991); Pulleyn (1997) 164–73. Personal sacrifices: for example Georgoudi (1998).

<sup>50</sup> For example Jost (1998).

<sup>51</sup> See Mikalson (2005) 161.

<sup>52</sup> Dissatisfaction with the *polis* model: Vlassopoulos (2007); Kindt (2009); Bremmer (2010); Rüpke (2011); Versnel (2011) in particular 88–142; Kindt (2012).

<sup>53</sup> Faraone (2008). On the exclusion of certain religious positions labelled ‘magical’ from ancient Greek religion, see Kindt (2012) 90–122 with further literature.

<sup>54</sup> Boedeker (2008) in particular 236–39.

These and other studies highlighting areas of divergence have complemented the more traditional picture of Greek personal religion as mapping onto the structures of *polis* religion. Attention has been drawn to the fact that some forms of worship in ancient Greece differed from communal Greek religion by being, in the words of Christopher Faraone, ‘quantitatively smaller than and qualitatively different from the cult of the city’.<sup>55</sup> As a result, ‘personal religion’ has emerged as a broad scholarly category for a number of diverse religious beliefs and practices which may or may not fit the conception of ‘*polis* religion’. Instone’s sourcebook is indeed representative here insofar as it highlights the broad spectrum of ancient Greek religious beliefs and practices which are ‘personal’ in that they reflect the outlook of individuals rather than collective religious concerns. We have again returned to the definition of personal religion and the problem of individual variations discussed at the beginning of this contribution.

Recently, however, research on conceptions of public and private has taken an altogether different turn, with far-reaching consequences for the study of ancient Greek personal religion. It has been pointed out that to think about public and private in dualistic terms – as clearly marked, opposing realms – is ultimately a remnant of a late 18th- and early 19th-century bourgeois European ideology and its typical mode of social organization, by which ‘the private’ was constructed as the realm of individualism and personal retreat from the demands of ‘the public’.<sup>56</sup>

To use such conceptions of ‘public’ and ‘private’ as universal categories of historical and cultural research is anachronistic insofar as it does not do justice to cultural and historical differences.<sup>57</sup> Instead, scholars have started to ask how conceptions similar yet by no means identical to what we would call ‘the public’ and ‘the private’ were constructed in ancient Greece and Rome. A fruitful way of answering this question is to investigate the coexistence and interplay of concepts of public and private on the linguistic level.

It has been noted that neither ancient Greek nor Latin had any direct equivalent to what we term ‘public’ and ‘private’. Even the Latin *privatus*, from which the English ‘private’ is derived, denotes a spectrum of meanings different from our term, again confirming the historical and cultural specificity of these concepts: for example, it refers to an individual without an office or to a citizen not part of the imperial family.<sup>58</sup> The relevant ancient Greek terms, such as *koinon*, *idion* and *dēmosion*, also refer to aspects of public and private (or perhaps better ‘corporate’ and ‘individual’) without, however, ever being identical.<sup>59</sup> When rendering these terms into English (or any other modern language) we have to be especially careful not to evoke connotations that are not there in the ancient Greek. In particular we should avoid translations which associate these terms firmly with either side of the (modern) public/private divide.<sup>60</sup> The ambiguity inherent in the English word ‘private’ for example – on the one hand pertaining to an individual or a small group, on the other hand implying something secret or hidden – is clearly absent from the Greek *idios*.

This insight has led to a productive line of enquiry which considers how in the ancient world various spaces, texts, cultural practices and institutions positioned themselves with regard to public and private. In particular, the scholars contributing to the special edition of the journal *Ktēma* (volume 23 (1998)) on public and private in ancient Greece (*Public et privé en Grèce ancienne: lieux, conduits, pratiques*) investigate ancient Greek conceptions of public and private in a variety of texts and contexts from the Geometric period and Homer to Hellenistic houses on Delos.<sup>61</sup> A

<sup>55</sup> Faraone (2008) 211 on the difference between family/household and *polis* religion.

<sup>56</sup> See, for example, Duby (1992) vii–ix (volume 1 of *A History of Private Life*). The *locus classicus* here is Habermas (1962).

<sup>57</sup> de Polignac and Schmitt Pantel (1998); Schmitt Pantel (2012).

<sup>58</sup> See, for example, Rosenberger (2012) 11–12; Schmitt Pantel (2012) 2.

<sup>59</sup> Casevitz (1998); Fouchard (1998).

<sup>60</sup> Although in practice, as here, this is not always avoidable as these terms are too embedded in current discourse to be free of any modern connotations.

<sup>61</sup> See the studies of Lévy (1998); Ceccarelli et al. (1998); Siebert (1998) respectively.

major outcome of this research is that rather than dual and antagonistic terms (in the sense of something being *either* public *or* private), public and private should be referred to as relational, mutually qualifying categories, which *together* and *in communication with each other* shaped and structured the socio-cultural landscape of the ancient world.<sup>62</sup>

Religion in particular provides a number of intermediate locations between public and private. A number of studies show the manifold ways in which religious institutions, rituals, monuments and other artefacts positioned and repositioned themselves between both realms.<sup>63</sup> ‘Personal’ dedications by individuals, for example, received a ‘public’ dimension by being put up on display in a sanctuary.<sup>64</sup> Greek funeral rituals with their sophisticated blending of public and private forms of mourning and commemoration provide another example.<sup>65</sup> Even mysteries – secretive as they were – negotiated public and private in manifold ways, for example by offering personal salvation through communal initiation into secrets.<sup>66</sup> ‘Personal religion’ in these examples describes an individual engagement with the supernatural that nevertheless draws on a larger public (communal) context.

## VI. The personal religious voice in the ancient Greek city: two case studies

A look at two further sources featuring ancient Greek personal religion confirms how productive it is to consider the ways in which personal religion embraces aspects of both public and private and competes with other religious voices in the religious ‘marketplace’ of the ancient Greek city: Theophrastus’ brief chapter on the *deisidaimôn* and Hippocrates’ treatise *The Sacred Disease*.<sup>67</sup>

Theophrastus’ chapter is part of his book *Charaktêres* (best translated as ‘traits’)<sup>68</sup> – a humouristic and very detailed study of an array of ‘types’ – perhaps rather, to play on Max Weber, ‘ideal types’, since they are so clearly composite fictions – to be found in Athens towards the end of the fourth century BC. Beside the *deisidaimôn*, there are also chapters on ‘the obnoxious man’, ‘the over-keen man’ and ‘the man of petty ambition’ – to name just three of 30 chapters on people who make social life a trial. As Jeffrey Rusten points out, the character sketches are ‘never generalizations, but catalogues of vivid detail’.<sup>69</sup> In particular, compared to Plutarch’s (much later) essay on *deisidaimonia*, which generalizes religious behaviour (see above), Theophrastus’ account is strikingly detailed and exemplary.<sup>70</sup> Even though the character sketches are certainly works of fiction (indeed parody or caricature), they provide invaluable insight into the religion of everyday life in fourth-century Athens.<sup>71</sup> After all, parody only ever works if it is focused on broadly recognizable aspects of real life.

The superstitious man is characterized by the fact that he hardly ever puts down the religious lens through which he observes the world. The comic side of such behaviour certainly springs from the fact that the superstitious man vastly exaggerates appropriate religious behaviour: he is the one who ‘washes his hands, sprinkles himself with water from a shrine, puts a spring of laurel in his mouth and walks around that way all day ...’. He suspects religious significance everywhere and is constantly concerned about the proper (religious) response: ‘[w]hen he sees a snake in his house he invokes Sabazios if it is the red-brown one, and if it is the holy one he sets up a hero-shrine there and then’.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>62</sup> See, for example, de Polignac and Schmitt Pantel (1998).

<sup>63</sup> See, in particular, D’Onofrio (1998); Jacquemin (1998); Jourdain-Annequin (1998); Villanueva-Puig (1998); Spahn (1998); Voutiras (2005); as well as Dasen and Piérart (2005); *ThesCRA* 8.4. (2012).

<sup>64</sup> Dedications and conceptions of public and private: for example Jacquemin (1998); Iossif (2005).

<sup>65</sup> Funerary ritual/commemoration between public and private: for example Stears (1995); Kavoulaki

(2005); Schmitt Pantel (2012) 2–3.

<sup>66</sup> For example L’Homme-Wéry (2005); Jaccottet (2005).

<sup>67</sup> Thphr. *Char.* 16; Hp. *Morb. Sac.*

<sup>68</sup> See Rusten and Cunningham (2002) 13.

<sup>69</sup> Rusten and Cunningham (2002) 9.

<sup>70</sup> See Plu. *Moralia* 164E–71F.

<sup>71</sup> See, for example, Bolkenstein (1929); Lane Fox (1996).

<sup>72</sup> Thphr. *Char.* 16.2, 16.4. (tr. Diggle (2004)).

Some of the behaviour ridiculed here takes place within the *oikos*. The superstitious man is said to engage frequently in purifications of his house and to decorate household statues (so-called ‘hermaphrodites’, possibly herms with male and female faces on opposite sides) excessively.<sup>73</sup> Some of these ritual actions explicitly involve other members of his household: on the fourth and seventh of every month he advises his *oikos* to boil wine in preparation for religious celebrations (including the decorating of hermaphrodites). Other religious practices take place outside the household, in the midst of the ancient Greek city. For example, he cleanses and purifies himself whenever he meets someone wearing cloves of garlic (possibly a thief who removed them from the crossroads).<sup>74</sup> He also announces that he intends to avoid pollution by staying away from grave-stones, corpses and women who have recently given birth.<sup>75</sup> Some of the behaviour described here as typical of the superstitious man explicitly involves others: for example, he is said to engage in Orphism together with his wife or children.<sup>76</sup>

The example of Theophrastus’ superstitious man confirms that ‘personal religion’ is not a matter of where it was practised or by whom: the religion of the superstitious man is not ‘private religion’ in any meaningful sense of the term. Nor are official religious concerns at stake here. Indeed, all these examples draw on aspects of public and private in different ways, insofar as they show how the individual in the ancient Greek city negotiated his or her unique religious outlook with that of the different communities of which s/he was part. What makes all these examples instances of ‘personal religion’ is the very fact that they show how individuals in the ancient Greek city adapted – and in this case amplified – culturally-given religious beliefs and practices to fit their personal religious needs.

To this end, the superstitious man also consults religious experts. He variously seeks out interpreters of dreams and other omens, prophets, initiators and priestesses; at least some of these will have been city officials who claimed particular religious expertise.<sup>77</sup> Yet if he finds the advice of such experts unsatisfying he readily deviates from it: when an *exegetes* suggests an unduly worldly response to what he perceives to be a religious problem – a hole in a sack of barley, which the *exegetes* suggests he should simply get fixed – the superstitious man chooses to ignore him and performs an expiation instead.<sup>78</sup> In the ancient Greek city, religious authority was a rather diffuse affair, and, as the example shows, ‘personal religion’ could draw on as well as disregard other perspectives.

At the most general level, then, Theophrastus’ example of the ‘superstitious man’ illustrates the plurality of religious voices in the ancient Greek city. It also reveals a powerful debate at the heart of the ancient Greek *polis* about the question of what is a sign and how one should respond to it, a debate that is, for example, also tangible in diverging positions on the meaning of oracular prophecies.<sup>79</sup> As one may expect in a religion which largely lacked a centrally-controlled and organized structure of authority (a ‘church’), a variety of answers to this question competed against each other. How one positioned oneself with regard to them, however, will have depended as much on the individual as on the larger social networks (including those of the *oikos* and the *polis*) of which one was part.

A strikingly similar picture about the nature of ancient Greek religion emerges from the Hippocratic treatise *The Sacred Disease*. Like Theophrastus’ text, the treatise illustrates the plurality of the religious voices in ancient Greece, including the personal voice of the individual. It also rather nicely reveals the competition among these voices and parades some of the strategies pursued by individuals to add particular weight to their personal point of view.

<sup>73</sup> Thphr. *Char.* 16.7 and 10 respectively. Herms as Hermaphrodites: LIMC 5.269 with Rusten and Cunningham (2002) 99, n.13. Diggle (2004) 367 argues that this is an allusion to a bisexual Cyprian god.

<sup>74</sup> Diggle (2004) 371 explains that the garlic was thought to protect the thief from Hekate’s wrath.

<sup>75</sup> Thphr. *Char.* 16.9.

<sup>76</sup> Thphr. *Char.* 16.12.

<sup>77</sup> For example Thphr. *Char.* 16.6, 16.11, 16.14.

<sup>78</sup> Thphr. *Char.* 16.6.

<sup>79</sup> The examples of the discussion of the so-called ‘Wooden Wall oracle’ at Athens and the debate about the meaning of the oracle pertaining to ‘lame kingship’ at Sparta immediately come to mind (see, for example, Hdt. 7.142–43 and Xen. *Hell.* 3.3.3 respectively).



*The Sacred Disease* (probably dating from the end of the late fifth or early fourth century BC) explains the nature of epilepsy from a doctor's point of view. The first part of the treatise is a passionate attack on widespread popular beliefs and their exploitation by certain self-professed healers.<sup>80</sup> The author argues against those 'specialists' who attribute certain diseases – epilepsy ('the sacred disease') in particular – to divine intervention.<sup>81</sup> Instead, he suggests, epilepsy has a natural cause and is divine only inasmuch as all nature (including all diseases) is divine.<sup>82</sup>

Multiple religious views feature in this text: first of all, there is the personal religious outlook of the Hippocratic author himself, who seeks to establish a natural explanation of disease without, however, fully editing the divine out of it (see above). Second, there are the ritual practices performed by his rivals, those self-proclaimed experts who draw on widespread religious beliefs to 'heal' epilepsy and other diseases with the help of incantations and purifications.<sup>83</sup> Finally, there are the religious views of the would-be patients which feature in the text only indirectly insofar as it is these views that both the Hippocratic doctor and his rivals seek to influence.

It is certainly tempting, from the modern point of view, to side with the author's apparently enlightened stance and to dismiss as mere superstition the religious outlook against which he writes. Yet that would be to disregard the power and circulation of these ideas in their ancient Greek context – not to mention the fact that, as Geoffrey Lloyd points out, the author's own 'scientific' explanations, developed in the second part of the treatise, are at times just as fanciful as the views he seeks to discredit.<sup>84</sup>

If we take seriously the perspective against which the doctor argues, the religious frictions at the heart of this treatise become apparent: they reveal some of the strategies of authority and persuasion by which individuals sought to promote their own points of view. In ancient Greece, as elsewhere, it was common to think about disease as some form of divine punishment. Yet the ways in which individuals will have made use of these kinds of thoughts was again a matter of personal circumstance. Theophrastus' superstitious man is said to have shuddered and spat down on his chest (the ancient Greek version of 'knock wood')<sup>85</sup> whenever he encountered an epileptic.<sup>86</sup> Traditional healers had their very own strategies of persuasion: by identifying particular divinities with particular diseases and their symptoms they invoked the air of a systematic body of knowledge, second only to that developed by the Hippocratic doctor himself. Moreover, to enroll the major divinities of the Greek pantheon as religious agents in their account of disease was a further strategy to convey authority to their interpretation of disease by tapping into the authority of traditional religious discourse. Parallels emerge between both texts in terms of the response they evoke to personal religion. Like Theophrastus, the Hippocratic author tries to marginalize certain religious views by branding them as an excess of religiosity. Like Theophrastus, he seeks to expose their absurd qualities through the use of irony and exaggeration.

## VII. Conclusion

This article has shown that in most, if not all, instances 'personal religion' is not simply 'private religion' in our modern and Western sense of the term 'private'. There is, for example, nothing 'private' about the religious beliefs of Theophrastus' superstitious man, whose exaggerated religiosity frequently occurs in public for all to see. 'Personal religion', it follows, coexisted with other manifestations of the religious including those of '*polis* religion'. Changes over time, then, rather emerge as shifts in the relationship between public and private, official and personal articulations of the religious.

<sup>80</sup> On these healers: Lloyd (1979) 37–49.

<sup>81</sup> Hp. *Morb. Sacr.* 1.1–10.

<sup>82</sup> See, for example, Hp. *Morb. Sacr.* 5.1–4, 21.1–8.

<sup>83</sup> See Lloyd (1979) 15–29; (1987): 27.

<sup>84</sup> Lloyd (1987) 27–89.

<sup>85</sup> See Rusten and Cunningham (2002) 101, n.20.

<sup>86</sup> Thphr. *Char.* 16.14.



Further research is now needed into the principles and practices of personal religion in themselves and in their larger social and cultural contexts. A promising avenue for further enquiry will, for example, explore the manifold ways in which individuals negotiate their personal religious beliefs and practices, on the one hand, with the official structures of ancient Greek religion, on the other. In doing so, however, it is important that we do not postulate a simple binary division between *polis* and personal religion. The most fruitful questions pertaining to ancient Greek personal religion promise to lie exactly in the realm where the structures of official Greek religion fade into those of personal religion and vice versa.

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ML = Meiggs, R. and Lewis, D. (1988) *A Selection of Greek Historical Inscriptions to the End of the Fifth Century BC* (revised edition) (Oxford)

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