CHAPTER I

Beyond the polis: rethinking Greek religion

Because the polis is most cherished and the real religion of the Greeks,
the battles for her also have the force and terror of religious wars and
every break with her fundamentally uproots the individual.

Jacob Burckhardt[1]

INTRODUCTION

An inquiry into ancient Greek religion beyond polis religion necessarily
starts from the question of what we mean by polis religion and the impact
of this model on how we conceive of ancient Greek religion as a field of
study. In current scholarship, particularly in the Anglo-American and Fran-
cophone worlds, polis religion has become a powerful interpretative model
for the study of Greek religion. The model is now sufficiently well estab-
lished that we need to explore its implications as well as the alternatives that
complement or move beyond it. Surprisingly, however, the implications
of the model are rarely discussed in the study 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 chapter 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 have positioned their work in regard to these issues.
Rather than rejecting the model outright, the chapter aims to move the

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[1] Burckhardt 1943: 62 (my translation).
[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. Some exceptions: Cole 1995;
Burkert 1995; Jameson 1997; Bremmer 2010. In the field of Roman religion the debate concerning
the implications and the applicability of the civic model is much more advanced: e.g., Woolf 1997;
Bendlin 2000: 115–35; Rüpke 2004; Scheid 2005: 125–8. There is no separate entry on polis religion
in recent reference works, such as Price and Kearns 2003; Jones, L. 2005.

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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.

Overall, this chapter argues that the polis model is good at highlighting the significance of the polis as an important structuring principle of the religious in ancient Greece. At the same time I argue that the polis model provides little, if any, help for understanding Greek personal religion and religious phenomena such as magic and mystery religions. I also argue that polis religion is focused more firmly on religious agency and neglects religious ideas and religious discourse. In doing so, the model relies on an implicit conception of religion as simply mapping on to the structures of Greek society – a simplification of the manifold ways in which religious symbols shape and are shaped by society.

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.[3] 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.[4] 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 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 on to 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.[5] In particular the poems of Homer and Hesiod had unified and structured the Greek pantheon. Religion offered a common set of ideologies and values, such as shared notions of

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[3] Sourvinou-Inwood 2000a; 2000b.   [4] See Sourvinou-Inwood 2000a: 13.
[5] Sourvinou-Inwood 2000b: 47.

purity and pollution, sacred and profane, human and divine, which were a reference point throughout the Greek world. Herodotus mentioned the religious dimension of a shared feeling of Greekness in book 8, when the Athenians allude to common mythological narratives about the gods and shared forms of prayer and sacrifice (8.144.2). 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. 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 concluded that polis religion embodied, negotiated and informed all religious discourse, including religious practices above the level of the individual poleis.[6]

In its general formulation, the model of polis religion reflects Durkheimian efforts to 'make sense' of Greek religion as a symbolic system, a common 'language' (see Chapter 3).[7] In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (first published in French in 1912), the foundational text for the emerging field of the sociology of religion, Durkheim described religion as 'a unified system of beliefs and practices', which brings together and defines those engaged in these beliefs and practices as a 'moral community'.[8]

Durkheim's definition of religion as a set of collective representations proved influential beyond the sociology of religion. In the field of classical studies his conception of the religious had an immediate impact on Jane Ellen Harrison, for example, who drew on Durkheim's conception of religion as a communal enterprise. In *Themis* Harrison variously acknowledged Durkheimian influences in how she conceived of the ways in which Greek myth and ritual reflected and constituted the structures of Greek society.[9]

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[6] Sourvinou-Inwood 2000a: 20.

[7] Cf. Evans's definition: 'Like spoken languages, cultures also comprise lived frameworks of their own, and they can be analysed as symbolic systems with their own order and organization that work to create meaning within their own context. These lived symbolic and religious systems are in some ways related to spoken languages; and as we do with foreign languages, we can make an effort to learn the symbolic language of religion and ritual in other cultures – even those in the distant past': Evans 2010: 7.

[8] See, e.g., Durkheim 1995 (1912): 44 for a succinct formulation of his definition of religion.

[9] See, e.g., Harrison 1912: xxii, 139, 477, 486. For a more extended discussion of Harrison's contribution to the study of ancient Greek religion see ch. 4.

While Harrison's focus on distinguishing 'primitive' stages in the evolution of religions eventually fell out of favour, inquiry into the social function of religious beliefs and practices (functionalism) provided an increasingly popular interpretative tool in classical scholarship. It was put to prominent use in the work of Walter Burkert, for example, whose position can perhaps best be described as structuralist-functionalist. For Burkert, rituals and the myths related to them provided the key to what was at stake behind religious phenomena as diverse as initiation rites and blood sacrifice, two aspects of the religious, which have the ultimate goal of creating and maintaining group solidarity and communal identity.[10]

Combined with structuralism (the inquiry into the patterns of social and religious organisation within a given culture and society), functionalism remains an important interpretative tool in the study of religious practices to the present day.[11] The model of polis religion is a good case in point, insofar as it draws on ideas first formulated by Durkheim and developed further in subsequent classical scholarship. 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.[12] At the same time, the model of polis religion attempts to overcome the ahistoricity of the strictly structuralist (or even formalist) perspective. It conceptualises 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 structuralist roots by grounding religion in the specific cultural setting of the archaic and classical polis as the cultural context of its symbolic meaning.

The model of polis religion has informed current scholarship in a variety of ways. The model itself has assumed different forms and formulations in the works of scholars indebted to a range of intellectual traditions. When discussing the model, therefore, we must distinguish in particular between an Oxford form of polis religion, as described most notably by Sourvinou-Inwood and Robert Parker, and a French version propagated most clearly

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[10] See, e.g., Burkert 1983a (on blood sacrifice); 1985: 264 (on initiation).
[11] See also ch. 3.
[12] See in detail Gould 2001. See also Burkert 1985: 119; Bowersock 1990: 7; de Polignac 1995a: 152.

in the work of Nicole Loraux and Louise Bruit Zaidman/Pauline Schmitt Pantel.[13]

The 'embeddedness' of Greek religion

Focus on the polis as the basic unit of Greek life gave rise to a crucial assumption underlying 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 aspect of Greek religion. The idea that Greek religion was embedded in the polis is ultimately derived from Moses Finley's influential conception of the embeddedness of the ancient economy.[14] Finley argued that in the ancient world, single areas of social interaction, such as the economy, are unavailable for conceptualisation. In analogy, Greek religion is also considered to be deeply embedded in the larger network of relationships within the polis. Greek religion was religion-in-practice and Greek religious practices permeated all spheres of life.[15] It follows that it is not possible to reflect upon Greek religion as a category in and of itself.

At the same time, the idea of the embeddedness of ancient Greek religion in the polis also acted as a check on the intrusion of concepts derived from the study of other (monotheistic) religious traditions, in particular from Christianity. Greek religion differed from Christianity 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, and no church. In the absence of such powerful organising principles, religion was structured alongside the socio-political structures of the polis.

The notion of the embeddedness of Greek religion in the polis, however, raises the question of exactly how we are supposed to conceive the relationship between the structures of the polis and those of ancient Greek religion. Walter Burkert identified three claims concerning the quality of the link between Greek religion and the polis inherent in the model of polis religion.[16] According to Burkert, the concept encompasses, first of

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[13] See in particular Schmitt Pantel 1992; Bruit Zaidman and Schmitt Pantel 1992; Loraux 1993; Parker 1996; Sourvinou-Inwood 2000a; 2000b; Parker 2005.
[14] Finley 1973. Cf. 'embeddedness': Bremmer 1994: 2–4; Evans 2010: 48.
[15] The same kind of embeddedness of religion is also discussed in studies of Roman religion: e.g., Rüpke 2004; Scheid 2005: 126.
[16] Burkert 1995: 202.

all, self-representation of the community through religious cults; second, it suggests control of religious practices by the polis through its decision-making organs; and third, polis religion sometimes implies that the polis created and transformed its religious institutions – effectively, the polis 'actually makes religion'.[17]

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 bypassing the question of direct control. In particular the Oxford version of polis religion presents religion as merely mapped on to the institutional landscape of the polis, thus de-emphasising the aspect of agency. In the works of scholars such as 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.

However, 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 '[e]ach significant grouping within the polis was articulated and given identity through cult', as Sourvinou-Inwood argued.[18] The important subdivisions of the polis, such as the demes and phratries, were all represented in specific cults. Even politically marginalised groups, such as women, had their own festivals and religious services specifically reserved for them.[19]

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 with no obvious link to the polis.[20] Take for example the consultation of oracles, such as those at Delphi, Dodona or Didyma or any of the less-known oracular shrines. In support of the polis

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[17] Burkert 1995: 202. De Polignac 1995a: 78–9 emphasised that this should not be seen as a programmatic policy of the individual poleis.

[18] Sourvinou-Inwood 2000a: 27.

[19] Sourvinou-Inwood 2000a: 27–37; 2000b: 38–44. Cf. Bremmer 1994: 2: 'In ancient Greece . . . religion was totally embedded in society – no sphere of life lacked a religious aspect.' For the religion of the demes and other subunits of the polis, see in detail Jameson 1997.

[20] See now also the sourcebook by Instone 2009, which focused specifically on the personal dimension of ancient Greek religion.

model one could, of course, point out that the fee (*pelanos*) paid before the consultation was negotiated between the officials of the oracle and the polis from which the consultant came.[21] While the economic side of oracle consultations thus fits into the framework of polis religion this is not always true for the questions asked and the responses received there. Our sources tell us, for example, of oracle consultations of a very personal nature, the significance of which was 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 sought.[22] Questions at Dodona were typically scratched on lead tablets, some brought to light by classical archaeology. Callicrates' question whether he would receive a child from his wife Nike, for instance, hardly reflected a polis concern.[23] Likewise, Thrasyboulos' desire to know to which god he should sacrifice in order to improve his eyesight expressed a personal health issue and hence a private concern.[24] The same was true when Agis consulted Zeus regarding the whereabouts of certain lost blankets and whether or not they were stolen.[25] The polis model is of little help to us in understanding the motivations, intentions and dynamics of these private oracle consultations. Greek religion transcended the polis. Even though his attitude towards religion was 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.[26]

Such examples reveal another dimension of the embeddedness of Greek religion, one not included in Burkert's list: the embeddedness of Greek religion in what could be called the 'symbolic order' of the polis. Although private concerns behind oracle consultations and the Greek festive calendars (inasmuch as they reflected the necessities of the agricultural cycle) may have fallen outside the scope of an institutionalised definition of the polis, they remained within the limits of the shared beliefs, ideas and ideals of the polis community.

Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, in particular, inspired by work in cultural anthropology (notably by Clifford Geertz: see Chapter 3), has focused on

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[21] See Rosenberger 1999 on the economic side of oracle consultations.
[22] For the oracle of Zeus at Dodona: Parke 1967. It is precisely those oracles that do not fit into the matrix of polis religion that have received relatively little scholarly attention. However, see recently Lhôte 2006.
[23] *SEG* IXX 426. See also Parke 1967: 265, no. 8.
[24] Parke 1967: 267, no. 14.   [25] Parke 1967: 272, no. 27.
[26] This rather strange omission, in light of the importance of religion in and for the polis, is put in context in his *Metaphysics*, which does feature a god, albeit one removed from human interests and concerns.

religion as part of a more general semantics of Greek culture.[27] 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.[28] To 'read' such religious symbols we must place them back in their original culture. 'Reading' as an act of decoding cultural symbols is a concept central to all 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 practices 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 developed elsewhere.[29] 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. Rather than speaking of polis religion, we may therefore prefer to state 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 was 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.'[30] In other words, the polis was 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.

Inconsistencies

In the previous section we explored the notion of the embeddedness of ancient Greek religion in the polis as implied in the model of polis religion.

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[27] E.g., Sourvinou-Inwood 1995: 21, n. 27. Geertz's notion of religion is best formulated in Geertz 1973: 87–125.
[28] See Sourvinou-Inwood 1991; 1995; 2003.   [29] Sourvinou-Inwood 2000a; 2000b.
[30] Burkert 1995: 203.

In this section we examine the question of the coherence and consistency of ancient Greek religion following from this notion.

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'.[31]

Unfortunately, however, in the historiographic practice of works on Greek religion, such concessions have all too frequently remained mere programmatic statements, made in the introduction 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 were perfectly proficient in the 'language' of religion, thus creating a consensual, internally consistent and single-voiced symbolic order. Although scholars working with the model readily admit that the polis consisted 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.[32]

To clarify: I am not arguing here against the usefulness of structuralism as an interpretative tool as such, which presupposes the existence of a more or less coherent symbolic system.[33] In fact structuralism, as exemplified so skilfully in the works of Jean-Pierre Vernant, for instance, has proved itself superbly capable of illuminating individual strands of Greek thought and literature (such as that of a particular myth in Hesiod, for example). I will myself occasionally draw on this mode of investigation in later

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[31] Gould 2001: 210. See also Jameson 1997: 184. On Gould's conception of Greek religion see also in detail ch. 3.

[32] Cf. Bendlin 2000: 119, who argues that versatility of religious ritual should be seen not as a symptom of its decline but as a feature of its vigour.

[33] Structuralism inquires into the patterns underlying Greek religious beliefs and practices with the ultimate goal of uncovering the symbolic constructs that constitute much of Greek religious thought. It therefore 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.

chapters of this book (see Chapters 2 and 6).[34] What I am arguing against is the assumption that there is only a single symbolic discourse in the ancient Greek world – that of polis religion – reaching into all areas of the Greek religious experience and providing a total and uncontested realm of religious meanings. The existence of such a level of coherence is, for example, implied in Burkert's *Greek Religion*, which brings together a vast array of material from different religious contexts in a composite account that aims to explain ancient Greek religion as such, largely to the exclusion of religious divergence and of religious phenomena such as 'magic' (see in more detail the discussion of Burkert's *Greek Religion* in the next section and in Chapter 4).

Against such tendencies, Hendrik S. Versnel dedicated two volumes to the revelation of inconsistencies within the system of Greek religion.[35] A similar point was made by Paul Veyne concerning the coexistence of divergent, even contradictory forms of belief in ancient Greece.[36] Veyne made a strong case for the need to look at beliefs in the context of varying concepts of truth. These concepts of truth, Veyne argued, are inherent in different epistemological discourses (such as mythology and historiography) and much of Veyne's interpretative effort was spent on uncovering their hidden rules. Moreover, Veyne reminded us about variations in religious beliefs over time, which change together with the concepts of truth that 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 BC thinkers, for example, narratives about the gods were subjected to critical inquiry. The supernatural was no longer on a separate plane but had to 'fit in with the rest of reality' to reassert its place in the cultural and historical memory of Greece.[37] It follows from Veyne's work that Greek religion was not a single-voiced 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 consistent and monolithic symbolic order is a simplification which does not do justice to the internal dynamics of these states. Recent work in social

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[34] E.g., Vernant 1981.
[35] 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.
[36] Veyne 1988.   [37] Veyne 1988: 32.

anthropology suggests that we 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.[38] Josiah Ober has borrowed concepts of culture from social anthropology and introduced them into the field of classics.[39] Appropriating Sewell's model of a 'thinly coherent' culture Ober emphasised the need to allow for multiple and even divergent identities within Greek society ('the cultures within Greek culture').[40]

In contrast to a 'thick coherence', the assumption of 'thin coherence' de-emphasises high levels of connectedness among individuals within one culture zone, thus allowing space for cultural contestation and transformation. Accordingly, Ober envisaged 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.[41]

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. Discussing the power of the polis model to explain religious beliefs and practices above the polis level, Sourvinou-Inwood stated that 'polis religion embraces, contains, and mediates all religious discourse – with the ambiguous and uncertain exception of some sectarian discourse'.[42] Her cautious ambivalence towards what she referred to as 'sectarian' religious beliefs and practices is symptomatic of the general approach to these cults adopted by scholars working with the polis model.[43] Religious beliefs and practices that do not conform to the polis model (those practices not administered by the polis and not representing the socio-political order of the polis) are frequently seen as being by definition not religion proper. The ongoing debate about what separates magic from religion, for example, is frequently supported by a definition of Greek religion

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[38] E.g., Comaroff and Comaroff 1991 and 1997, as discussed in ch. 3.
[39] Ober 2005: 69–91.   [40] Cf. Dougherty and Kurke 2003.
[41] Ober 2005: 77–82.   [42] Sourvinou-Inwood 2000a: 20.
[43] Bremmer 2010: 22–9 identifies a Christianising distinction between church and sect as the point of reference here and criticises the resulting marginalisation of religious phenomena such as Orphism as 'of a somewhat less respectable or marginal character', a marginalisation which is not supported by the ancient evidence: Bremmer 2010: 2.

as civic religion (see Chapter 4).[44] The much-debated question of the nature and quality of the religious phenomenon referred to as Orphism – in particular whether it constitutes a separate 'religious movement' – may reflect Christianising assumptions about the nature of religion. But this question is also representative of the difficulties we face when we try to position these cults as distinct from mainstream Greek religion.[45] To situate such cults and practices strictly outside Greek religion narrowly defined as polis religion, however, runs the risk of circularity. It marginalises exactly those areas of religious activity that the model cannot sufficiently explain.

The relationship between phenomena such as 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 discourse' might tempt us to assume.

To start with, despite their distinct features, Orphism, Bacchic cults and magical practices responded to and interacted 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 Protogonus, to the first king Uranus, and extends its end with the reign of Dionysus.[46] The result is a reorganisation of the Greek pantheon that takes the traditional model as its point of departure.[47] 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.[48] 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

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[44] The literature on this question is vast. The debate goes all the way back to James Frazer's (now dismissed) 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 and Obbink 1991; Versnel 1991a; Bremmer 1999. A comprehensive introduction to ancient magic and the debates surrounding it can be found in Graf 1997a.

[45] The old position that sees Orphism as a separate religious movement originated with Rohde 1972 (1890/1894) and was further advocated by Guthrie 1935 and Nilsson 1952 (among others). This position was successfully refuted by Linforth 1941; Zuntz 1971; Burkert 2006 (1977). West 1983: 1 refers to it as the 'pseudo-problem of the supposed Orphic religion'. The debate is nicely summarised by Parker, who advocates the cautious middle position prevailing in scholarship at the time, and who concludes that 'the question about the unity of Orphism must be left unanswered': Parker 1995: 487.

[46] Parker 1995: 487–96.

[47] On the relationship between Orphic and Hesiodic theogony see Guthrie 1935: 83–4. Cf. Edmonds 2004: 75–80.

[48] On the overlap between prayer and magic see Graf 1991.

between mystery religions and magic on the one hand and traditional religion on the other 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 'unlicensed' (Parker) or 'elective' (Price) cults were not recruited from socially or politically marginal groups. As Stephen Halliwell 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'.[49] To equate religious marginality with social marginality is 'a simplification of the nature of (Greek) religion itself'.[50] Some of the Orphic gold tablets were found in the tombs of relatively affluent and hence socially accepted members of society.[51] Likewise, those engaged in polis religion were the same people who would in specific circumstances resort to magic.[52] Religious phenomena such as magic, Orphism and Bacchic cults remained deeply embedded in the cities' socio-political and normative structures.

Some of the most productive current work therefore focuses on the relationship between the city and 'unauthorised' religious beliefs and practices without simplifying either entity as closed and monolithic.[53] 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 Dionysus was an accepted part of Athenian religious experience and not a unique or unusual feature.[54] 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'.[55]

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 was the diversity of Greek religious beliefs and practices in particular that composed the fabric of Greek polytheism. Thin coherence might 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.

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[49] Halliwell 2005.　　　[50] Halliwell 2005.
[51] See Parker 1995: 496. On these tablets see also Graf and Johnston 2007; Bowden 2010: 148–55.
[52] See Graf 1999: 1–2.　　　[53] E.g., Edmonds 2004.
[54] Osborne 2010.　　　[55] Osborne 2010: 402.

At this stage, however, 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.

The 'local' and the 'universal'

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 this, to the panhellenic dimension of Greek religion. As a result, most 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 (see Chapter 5 for a correction of this view). Unfortunately, however, despite the heavy weight they are made to carry, both concepts (the 'local' and the 'universal' or 'panhellenic') remain largely undefined in current scholarship.[56]

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.[57] Local variations are mostly used to illuminate such general features. The appearance of pictorial representations of Aphrodite dressed in 'long sumptuous 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 orientalising nude figure.[58] 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? Likewise, the depiction of the nude Aphrodite about to take a bath, crafted by Praxiteles around 340 BC for the sanctuary at Cnidus, 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

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[56] E.g., Sourvinou-Inwood 1978.   [57] Burkert 1985: 152–6.   [58] Burkert 1985: 155.

of the goddess of love, the embodiment of all womanly charms'.[59] The circumstances which explain this change in representation as well as the contexts in which this statue featured at Cnidus remain unexplored. Burkert's account is driven by the overall aim of bringing single local aspects of the Greek pantheon together into one more or less coherent narrative of ancient Greek religion.[60] Similar observations could be made concerning the way in which Burkert and other scholars deal with forms of *epiklēseis* ('invocations'), 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. 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.

It is in this area of scholarly activity that the model of polis religion has proven most productive: the polis model can provide a viable way around such problems. If fully embraced, it can furnish 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 therefore one of the model's strengths that it embraces 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 is a good example of a productive use of the polis model in this way.[61] 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

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[59] Burkert 1985: 155. On Praxiteles' Aphrodite see also ch. 6.
[60] This approach is justified in Burkert 1985: 8: 'Would it not be more correct to speak in the plural of Greek religions? Against this must be set the bond of common language and, from the eighth century onward, the common Homeric literary culture ... 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.'
[61] See Parker 1996; 2005. See also Faraone 1985.

(implicit) antipode of Greek religion as such, but functions rather as its own self-contained unit of investigation.

While Parker's work has shown a way around this problem for the study of 'local' religion as it manifested itself in individual poleis such as Athens, the question emerges of how we are to extend this focus to the study of religious institutions usually associated with the other, 'panhellenic', side of the spectrum (the sanctuaries of Delphi and Olympia immediately come to mind, but also the religion of Homer, etc.). Here, too, we need to find ways to move beyond the simple dualities of the 'local' and the 'universal' and, as it were, between polis religion and Greek religion beyond the polis, for example by placing them into a more pluralistic religious landscape (see Chapter 5).[62]

Developments beyond the Classical period

The assumption of a relatively stable and coherent religious system implied in the model of polis religion has also influenced the temporal focus of many studies of ancient Greek polis religion, which, in turn, has been supported by the traditional definition of the polis. Traditionally, classical scholarship has worked with a conception of the polis as an independent form of social and political organisation that was considered to have come to a more or less sudden end during the second half of the fourth century BC. When Philip II defeated the Thebans and Athenians at the Battle of Chaironeia in 338 BC he subjected them to Macedonian supremacy, hence putting an end to the Greek city-state as defined by independence (*autonomia*). The model of polis religion implicitly relies on such a definition of the polis: most studies exploring polis religion focus on the religious system of the archaic and classical periods only as a time of relative religious coherence.[63]

Despite the fundamental changes in the religious landscape between the eighth and fourth 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'.[64] 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 of continuities in religious beliefs and practices or the acknowledgement of differences – without, however,

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[62] See Scott 2010: 270–2.
[63] E.g., Burkert 1985; Bruit Zaidman and Schmitt Pantel 1992; Bremmer 1994.
[64] Cf. Sewell's brilliant definition of synchronic analysis, which, 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: 40.

attempting to ground these differences in a more comprehensive account of Greek religion during the Hellenistic and Roman periods.[65] We still lack, for example, a comprehensive work on Hellenistic religion, which strikes a subtle balance between continuity and change.[66]

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 recognises the need to include both perspectives.[67] His first volume is explicitly entitled *Athenian Religion: A History*.[68] This chronological study of the polis religion of Athens is supplemented by a second volume, which is thematically organised.[69] However, Parker's decision to split his account into separate volumes reflects and ultimately embodies the difficulty of the model in combining synchronic and diachronic perspectives and structure with agency. 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 that shape and are shaped by it.[70] 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.[71]

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[65] See, e.g., Griffiths 2005, who describes the elements of Hellenistic religion but does not 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: Smith 1978a: 88–103, 129–47.

[66] 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. Some aspects of Hellenistic religion are also discussed by Corrington 1986; Sørensen 1989; Mendels 1998.

[67] Bruit Zaidman and Schmitt Pantel 1992; Parker 1996.

[68] Parker 1996.   [69] Parker 2005.   [70] See n. 64.

[71] 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 multifaceted 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: e.g., Jameson 1997. I would like to thank Jan Bremmer for pointing this out to me.

There is, however, a larger question looming in the background of the discussion of the problem of historicity and issues of continuity and change, a problem which is fundamental to the study of ancient Greek religion beyond the polis: that of what we take the polis to be. This question is important because the way in which we answer it will have serious ramifications for what can and cannot be understood by polis religion.

The conception of the sudden end of the polis in the fourth century BC has recently been challenged. In particular, the scholars of the Copenhagen Polis Centre have made a strong case for adopting a much broader conception of the polis, as existing beyond the classical period.[72] Morgens Herman Hansen, for example, has argued that *autonomia* (in the sense of full independence) was never really 'an irreducible characteristic' of the polis.[73] Even before the Battle of Chaironeia some poleis were dependent upon others. The poleis inhabited by the Lakedaimonian *perioikoi*, for example, were dependent upon Sparta.[74] Moreover, several cities had already lost their independence when they joined the Delian or Peloponnesian Leagues.

Scholars like Hansen have therefore suggested that it is more productive to refer to a conception of *autonomia* as encompassing self-governance rather than full independence.[75] Hansen and Nielsen work with a definition of the polis as 'a small, highly institutionalised and self-governing community of citizens . . . living with their wives and children in an urban centre . . . and its hinterland . . . and slaves'.[76] This conception of the polis, however, continued to exist far into the Hellenistic and Roman periods. The end of the Greek polis as a self-governing entity, then, occurred during late antiquity and in a gradual process that started with the centralised bureaucracy set up by Diocletian in the third century AD and was accelerated by a variety of factors, including the early medieval migrations (in the western part of the Empire) and the spread of Christianity (in the East).[77]

For the study of ancient Greek religion several important implications follow from this broader definition of the polis. It flags the need to bring the religion of Hellenistic and Roman Greece more firmly into the picture we sketch of ancient Greek religion – a need which will be variously addressed throughout this book, notably in Chapter 6. Moreover, the inclusion of post-classical Greek religion makes it all the more necessary to allow for inconsistencies and to move away from an overly narrow focus on those aspects of Greek religious culture rooted in official (civic) discourse.

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[72] See Introduction, n. 28.   [73] Hansen 2006: 48.   [74] See Shipley 1997.
[75] Hansen 2006: 49.   [76] Hansen and Nielsen 2004: 31.
[77] Hansen and Nielsen 2004: 20; Hansen 2006: 50.

The Hellenistic and Roman periods witnessed not only an increase in Greek personal religion and a turn towards a more spiritual experience of the divine but also saw the rise of new religious institutions and the introduction of new beliefs and practices (for example, emperor worship, the emergence of exotic cults, such as the ones of Isis and Serapis, and the rise of holy men) which took their legitimacy and their binding force from contexts of social and political life beyond the polis. The adoption of a broader definition of the polis, it follows, necessitates the adoption of a broader conception of the religious culture of ancient Greece, in order to accommodate such features of the religious.

Religious ideas versus religious practice

The temporal focus on the religion of the archaic and classical periods is not the only limitation of the model of polis religion: the preference of religious practice is another. Scholars working with the model of polis religion focus strongly on religious agency while largely excluding religious beliefs from their accounts of Greek religion.[78] Although Sourvinou-Inwood hoped to have 'proposed certain reconstructions of ancient religious perceptions pertaining especially to the articulation of polis religion', religious beliefs do not feature in her definition of polis religion.[79] It may be tempting to point out that the category of belief is a typical twenty-first-century interest, which does not help to describe the realities of ancient Greek religion. But the very fact that Greek culture had no word to say *credo* ('I believe') and no creed (no prescribed, organised system of belief) does not mean that the category of belief itself – in the sense of certain shared assumptions about the nature of the divine – was absent from ancient Greek religion. Ancient Greek culture was rich in narratives which relied on Greek notions about the nature of the gods and their availability to human knowledge in order to make sense (see the examples discussed in Chapters 2 and 6). Magical practices, too, relied on shared religious conceptions about the nature and power of certain gods inherent in Greek religion, for example by inverting the way in which they feature in official Greek religion (see Chapter 4). The relative absence of religious beliefs and of religious discourse more generally from some works in the field therefore warrants an explanation.

The model of polis religion was successful in helping us analyse religious practice, owing to its embeddedness in the polis, since human agency

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[78] E.g., Jameson 1997 focuses mainly on ritual and leaves out religious beliefs almost entirely. Thanks again to Jan Bremmer for bringing this to my attention.
[79] Sourvinou-Inwood 2000a: 37.

(at least during archaic and classical times) always refers in one way or another 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.[80] Other works demonstrate the close link between religion and power in pagan priesthood, or depict the introduction of new gods as a powerful tool to achieve social and political change.[81]

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, concluded 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*.'[82]

It was Burkert, however, who wrote *Homo Necans*, a work that assigns a central role to the deep-seated meaning of blood sacrifice.[83] Against this background it is curious that he made 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 older scholarship (the works of Harrison, Cornford or Murray, for instance), it is certainly less correct for the reconstruction of Greek religious beliefs and practices that carefully reflects on its own premises.[84] 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.[85] 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 fed into this practice. These included, but were not limited to, Greek notions about the gods and their reciprocal relationship with humanity and Greek ideas

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[80] Schmitt Pantel 1992.   [81] Beard and North 1990; Garland 1992.   [82] Burkert 1995: 205.
[83] Burkert 1983a.   [84] Harrison 1903; 1912; Murray 1912; Cornford 1914.
[85] Cf. Evans 2010: 7: 'Ancient Greek religion had little to do with belief, and a great deal to do with practice and observance of common ancestral customs.'

about sacrificial purity and the special status of blood. The real challenge would have been to find a way of reconciling Greek religious beliefs and practices as they came together in the minds of those involved in them.

'Beyond the polis' from the polis level upwards

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 and so on, as I have done in the sections above, but 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 context of the polis.

When it was first published in 1984, François 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 overemphasise 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 *ethnē*, were seen as remnants in a larger evolutionary scheme that culminated in the polis.[86] 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 generalising claim, classical scholars 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.[87] The larger significance of this debate for scholarship on Greek religion certainly lies in its re-evaluation of the role of the polis in

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[86] E.g., McInerney 1999: 1–7 argued that the focus on the polis led to the scholarly neglect of ethnic identity.
[87] E.g., the changes de Polignac made in the English edition of his work and, in particular, in de Polignac 1995b.

relation to other units of collective identity (see the discussion of Olympia in Chapter 5). 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 coexist with other forms of identity and organisation. 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, suggested that we complicate our picture of Early Iron Age and archaic cult practice in various ways.[88] She advocated 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 Locris, Achaea and Arcadia), Morgan revised widespread notions in scholarship that were based primarily on the cases of large and central poleis, such as Athens, Sparta and Argos, which were atypical in many ways.[89] For the region of Thessaly, for instance, Morgan traced the process in which a local Early Iron Age cult of Enodia gradually turned into a pan-Thessalian deity identified with the Olympic divinity of Zeus Thaulius.[90] Pointing in particular to the existence of *ethnos* sanctuaries in this and other territories, she concluded that 'the priority accorded to the polis . . . as the most dynamic, creative and influential form of political organisation is no longer sustainable'.[91] In several archaeological case studies Alexandros Mazarakis Ainian reached a similar conclusion.[92] Most notably, perhaps, in his rich and comprehensive investigation of the genesis of the Greek temple between the eleventh and the eighth centuries BC, he pointed to the existence of other worshipping communities above the polis level.[93]

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.[94] For the late archaic, classical and Hellenistic periods, there is plenty of evidence of ritual activity administered by the *ethnē*, not the poleis. An inscription, for example, dating probably

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[88] E.g., Morgan, C. 1994; Morgan, K. A. 2003.   [89] See Morgan 2003.   [90] Morgan 2003: 135–55.
[91] Morgan 2003: 6.   [92] E.g., Mazarakis Ainian 1985; 1988.   [93] E.g., Mazarakis Ainian 1997: 393.
[94] E.g., Hall 1997; Morgan 2003; Freitag et al. 2006.

from 216 BC, testifies to the existence of a sanctuary of the Acarnanian League.[95] The sanctuary was that of Apollo of Actium, which housed an important festival.[96] During the Hellenistic period this sanctuary served as a symbolic centre of the league distinct from its political centre, which remained on Leucas.[97] A treaty dating from around 300 BC likewise attests to religious practices administered by the *ethnē*: the sanctuary of Athena Itonia served as the centre of the Boeotian *ethnos*; the Pamboeotia, a Boeotian festival featuring games held in honour of Athena Itonia, were held in Coronea even before that time.[98] As well as *ethnos* cults, there were several religious institutions, in particular large and important sanctuaries, that were administered by amphictionies. These leagues of several poleis, such as the pan-Ionian 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.[99]

CONCLUSION

To sum up, there is 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 organisational structures characteristic of most modern religions, such as a structured community of believers (such as a church) and a systematic and authoritative statement of belief (such as a creed), 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 generalising 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.

   The weaknesses of the model, however, spring from its narrow and problematic promotion of the polis as the primary discourse of power relevant for the study of ancient Greek religion. 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

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[95] *IG* IX² 1, 583.   [96] See Habicht 1957.

[97] See Parker 1998a: 27. Parker includes a special appendix, listing evidence for various religious practices among the *ethnē*.

[98] See Buck 1979: 88–90; Schachter 1981: 117–27. Parker 1998a: 30.

[99] On this and other amphictionies see Tausend 1992: 55–7.

between religious structures and socio-political structures remains under-theorised 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. One result of this is that scholarly accounts oscillate between the depiction of religion as a mainly passive force within society (mapping on to the reach of polis institutions) and 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 often 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.

Further, the model does not ask all the questions one might wish to ask 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.[100] 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.[101] 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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[100] To use an example from Roman religion: scholars working with the polis model would point out that the Bacchanalia scandal of 186 BC 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.

[101] See Woolf 1997: 77–82.