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Review: Julia Kindt, *Rethinking Greek Religion*

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As befits a book with 'Rethinking' in its title, Julia Kindt's study of Greek religion looks both back at earlier ways of thinking about Greek religion and forward to newer models. It does not aim to give a systematic account of Greek religion from the perspective of present scholarship, but rather to trace the recent evolution of scholarship on the topic and to sketch a way forward. As such, the book will be most useful to scholars or students with some background in Greek religion, rather than to those approaching the topic for the first time. Kindt's exposition is clear and accessible enough even for sophisticated undergraduates, but I suspect the book will have its greatest impact upon graduate students who are beginning their own deeper research into the study of Greek religion. Kindt's *Rethinking Greek Religion* provides a clear articulation of a theoretical shift in the study of Greek religion, however, and scholars of all levels will benefit from it.

Kindt's primary target in previous scholarship is the polis-religion model, expounded first and foremost by Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood and Robert Parker but extending its influence throughout much recent scholarship on Greek religion.¹ She deftly traces the rise of this model from the reaction to earlier approaches to Greek religion (such as that of Jane Ellen Harrison) that separated religion from the social and political aspects of Greek culture. To take better account of the 'embeddedness' of Greek religion in the social structures, scholars began to focus on ritual practice (especially, in the schools of Vernant and Burkert, on sacrifice) rather than, like Wilamowitz, on *die Glaube der Hellenen*.² In her first chapter, Kindt shows the impact of Durkheim's anthropological models on this scholarship, making the society as a unit the object of focus and mapping religious practices onto the structures of the social order. While Kindt agrees that such a focus has brought many valuable insights, she argues that the polis-religion model is not (and was never intended to be) a theory of everything (p. 5),

¹ Particularly notable are the seminal essays by Sourvinou-Inwood" (Sourvinou-Inwood C. (2000). "What is Polis Religion?" and "Further Aspects of Polis Religion" in Buxton, R. (ed.), *Oxford Readings in Greek Religion*, Oxford, 13-37, 38-55.) as well as the works of Parker (Parker, R. (1996). *Athenian religion: a history*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, and Parker, R. (2005) *Polytheism and society at Athens* (Oxford & New York).).

² Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, Ulrich von. 1973 (1931-32). *Der Glaube der Hellenen*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft. Contrast Detienne, M., & Vernant, J. (1989). *The cuisine of sacrifice among the Greeks*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, or Burkert, W. (1983). *Homo necans: The anthropology of ancient Greek sacrificial ritual and myth*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

and she argues that scholars should make their object of study the entire 'symbolic universe' of Greek religion.

This shift in focus involves a shift in anthropological theory from Durkheim to Geertz, from thinking of culture as a socio-political entity to conceiving it as a complex sign system that can be analyzed with the tools of linguistic and semiotic theories. It further entails a shift in the goal from describing the fixed structure of the social order to understanding the dynamics of a fluid (and therefore often inconsistent) system. Kindt refers to Sewell's model of 'thin coherence' (p. 22), and it is a pity that her study could not take into account Versnel's recent Sather lectures that stress precisely the same point about the inherently inconsistent nature of Greek (or any) religion, since Versnel works out at length many of the ideas Kindt outlines here.³

Kindt expands her argument with a series of case studies in the following chapters (2-5) that illustrate a further methodological point, the preference for apparently trivial and limited cases that illuminate broader yet underlying issues in the whole system. Rather than turning to the systematic accounts of the philosophers or even the elaborate worlds of the tragedians to uncover the 'symbolic universe', Kindt turns to brief anecdotes in authors such as Philochorus or Athenaeus or to the strange formulae of the Attic curse tablets. Here she shows her foundation in the New Historicist methods that turn away from the canonical literary sources to the materials once labeled 'sub-literary' or simply dismissed as late and trivial. Although she draws explicitly on Darnton's model in *The Great Cat Massacre* (1984), she might have noted the impact of New Historicist studies in classical culture starting in the early 1990s.

From each of her case studies, Kindt draws wider conclusions about the 'symbolic universe' or, as she refers to it elsewhere, the 'theology' of Greek religion. Chapter two deals with the anecdote in Athenaeus (14.614ab) of Parmeniscus, who lost his ability to laugh at the oracle of Trophonius but regained it when he was surprised by the aniconic form of the statue of Leto at Delos. This peculiar little tale, she points out, shows some of the underlying expectations about the interactions of mortals and the divine, whether through the verbal contact of oracles or through the visual experience of divine statues. In chapter three, Kindt uses a mention in Philochorus (FrGH 328 F181) that property from the Thirty Tyrants in Athens was used to supply processional equipment for a public procession involving metics not only to draw attention to a ritual form (processions) that has received less attention than sacrifice, but also to show that the Greek 'symbolic universe' involved the conscious reuse of

³ Versnel, H. S. (2011). *Coping with the gods: Wayward readings in Greek theology*. Leiden; Boston: Brill. Kindt does refer briefly to his earlier works on inconsistencies in Greek religion, p. 21 fn. 35.

inherently polyvalent religious symbols. The same point is made in chapter four with the story from Philostratus (VA 1.22.2) of Apollonius' reading of the omen of the lioness with eight cubs; the meaning of religious symbols is dependent upon the context of their interpretation.

In this chapter, Kindt also looks at various kinds of evidence for curse tablets, concluding that "the presence of ritual binding in Athens and elsewhere indicates the existence of alternative locations of the religious alongside those defined by civic compromise." (p. 113) The polis order, therefore, is not the only meaningful context for religious activity, even if religious expressions in the polis share the same 'symbolic universe' as religious expressions like curse tablets that are often labeled 'magic'.⁴ In the following chapter, Kindt uses the example of statues at Olympia to discuss the multiplicity of important contexts for the significance of such symbols within Greek religion, not just the local polis context and the broadest panhellenic context, but a wide variety of others, from personal and familial to regional and ethnic. Kindt returns to statues again for the case study of the sixth chapter, where she explores what the peculiar set of tales of people trying to have sex with statues (*agalmatophilia*) reveals about the concerns within Greek religion with divine ontology and mortals relations with the gods.

These case studies reveal the weaknesses of Kindt's methodology as well as the strengths, since the separation of the major thematic points across these different case studies weakens the overall synoptic view, despite the efforts she makes to pull things back together at the end of each chapter. In some sense, such a problem is endemic to the New Historicist approach, which by its focus on the peculiar and apparently inexplicable always runs the risk of merely seeming to illuminate only the particular case rather than the whole system of which it is a part. This problem is more apparent than real, however, since such individual cases should always be understood as examples of more general phenomena, individual *paroles* which provide insight into the overall nature of the *langue*. Some of case studies also seem to cry out for further development with more complex theoretical tools. Kindt gestures (pp. 42-43, 52-54) toward cognitive theories for the understanding of religious modes of viewing statues, but never really pushes the limits of the potential of such a theory. Richer semiotic analysis might likewise better illumine her points about the polyvalence of symbols, while her discussions of the differing contexts of religious acts would

⁴ p. 99. Kindt's point that 'magic' and normative polis religion share the 'same theology' (p. 122) even though they appear in different social contexts is a helpful approach to dealing with the perennially vexed question of the relation between magic and religion, even if much more could be said on the subject.

benefit from the application of theories of performance that consider the interactions of performers and audiences in these different arenas.

Such explorations might well have their place in a more extended study than the present one, but it is important to remember the principal aims of the work. Kindt's book does not provide a full outline of the system or systems of Greek religion or even of the symbolic universe of Greek religion; it merely serves as a call for scholars to turn their attentions to the symbolic universe as a whole rather than the social systems or practices that are a part of it. Some might complain that this idea is not new, but Kindt does not claim it is a radical innovation; indeed, she carefully shows the theoretical predecessors of the model she articulates, as well as other scholars who work in similar ways.

Nevertheless, Kindt's book clearly articulates the theoretical shift at issue and provides a model for the kind of work that such a Geertzian, New Historicist, semiotic theoretical approach can underpin. I might wish that she had taken many of her points further, both her discussions of the history of the scholarship and her analyses of primary evidence, but she is surely moving in the right direction. Kindt's rethinking of Greek religion points the way forward to more studies of the same kind, and I think that the scholarly understanding of Greek religion will be the richer for it.