

REVIEWS

OLOF GIGON ON MARTIN P. NILSSON

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Geschichte der griechischen Religion

BY MARTIN P. NILSSON

Vol. I: *Bis zur griechischen Weltherrschaft*

Vol. II: *Die hellenistische und römische Zeit.*

Munich: C. H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1941 and 1950.

Whenever the attempt is made to draw a picture of Greek religion as a whole, there looms in the background, explicitly or tacitly, one fundamental fact: The religiosity of the Occident in all its theories, views, and forms of expression is determined by two elements, the Old Testament (above all, the Psalms and the Prophets) and the religion of the Greeks. These two elements have penetrated and combated one another from the time of the Apostles, and still in our days this combat continues to exert its influence even on the most sober presentation of the Greeks. It induces in the naïve interpreter a bias frequently fatal; Greek religion will then be seen as a complex which in spite of its rank and stature remains replete with regrettable

follies and strange contradictions. Or else its Olympian, Apollinian, or even Dionysiac perfection will be played off against the barbarism of Christianity. The more subtle interpreter will yet remain under the impression that Hellenism and the Old Testament represent a polarity of a timeless order as it is not to be met with again throughout the history of the world. These two questions then will arise: Does historical fact permit us to interpret either or both of those entities from the vantage point of that polarity even as we may on occasion feel moved, with varying justification, to interpret Plato and Aristotle, Epicurus and the Stoa in terms of their polarity? And again, is the uniqueness of the Old Testament within

the world of the Ancient Orient and that of the Greek religion within the Indo-European and Mediterranean spheres actually so marked as it may appear to be when the idea of that polarity is taken as the vantage point?

We may leave the Old Testament aside. It does not concern us in this context. What does concern us and what needs must be a decisive concern of the historian of Greek religion is the problem, to what extent is Greek religion an objectively unique phenomenon? To what extent does it differ unambiguously from all other known religions? The danger of overemphasising the uniqueness of the Greeks is on the whole smaller in present-day research than is the opposite danger of arguing away completely the distinctiveness of Greek religion by making use of anthropological material which is only too lavishly and conveniently at our disposal.

Nilsson's handbook with its wide scope and its admirably rich documentation avoids both extremes. Altogether it avoids extremes and radicalisms. The flow of the presentation is of such imperturbable calm and evenness that one feels tempted to believe only a Scandinavian untouched by the high-strung passion of continental thought could have written such a book on such a subject.

With all this a certain oneness is still to be felt; it may be readily understandable, yet it is not devoid of danger. Every religion consists of two completely different components. On the one hand, the objective cult: sacrifices, temples, festivals, priestly institutions, and so on, which, in principle, can be grasped clearly through the documents,

and which, in most cases, is distinguished by an extraordinary staying-power. On the other hand, the subjective faith, toward which it is possible to penetrate only by means of an extremely careful interpretation of all the literature of a people. The two components belong together. For only when we realise the role of the cult for the faith, how it is understood and what position it occupies in real life, will we be informed about the historical religion. The methods, however, by which cult and faith may be investigated need not be identical. The scholar whose approach is moulded by anthropology will be inclined to emphasise the cult. The scholar whose starting point is literature will emphasise faith. The methods of anthropology and of literary science (*Literaturwissenschaft*) are in actual fact very different. It would hardly be strange, then, to suspect that for the individual researcher it is well-nigh impossible to control both scientific methods equally well so as to follow up both aspects of religion with the same degree of concentration. It is no criticism of Nilsson's monumental work if we note that especially in the first volume the description of cult forms clearly outweighs the analysis of religious feeling.

Let us now consider the significance of this oneness in terms of the problem from which we started, the distinctive character of Greek religion. Nilsson's careful presentation leaves no doubt as to the historical singularity of Greek religion. But it is only with respect to the cult that the reader is enabled to visualise this fact; the sphere of belief is left in a hazy twilight. Yet it

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would seem to us that in this very area convincing evidence could have been brought to show the astounding course religious development took among the Greeks. Let me briefly adduce a few details.

With respect to the cult we are told that only rarely were the images of the gods considered holy or thaumaturgic (I, 71 *et seq.*), that in regard to taboos Greek religion shows the same moderation as in regard to the belief in the force to which they are due. What we do find is confined to those spheres which are viewed by all peoples (including the modern) with a special awe: physical uncleanness, the sexual life, and death, including homicide and murder. The proliferation of certain prohibitions leading to an especially high valuation of chastity and fasting, in short, of asceticism, is, generally speaking, completely missing in Greek religion (I, 81). Likewise, there are no clear traces of divination by necromancy (I, 157–8). Tree cult as well as the cult of animals is extremely rare (I, 194 *et seq.*). Finally there was no professional priesthood, a fact which although but briefly touched upon (I, 670–1) is likely to have been of great importance. These and other observations point clearly in one direction; they are all the more valuable as the author is offering them, with great prudence and restraint.

It is true that the direction in which Nilsson moves would become clearly recognisable only if the faith of the Greeks were included in the scope of consideration. For in this area the impression left in the observer by the development from Homer to the Neo-

platonists is that of a truly overwhelming oneness and uniqueness. The experience that confronts us with all other peoples of our globe as an intensely felt religious faith we find here in the midst of a process of dissolution, from the very beginning. One has often failed to realise that this dissolution proceeds almost simultaneously along three lines. The first we shall call mythisation. Schematically speaking it will begin when man no longer is content to know merely whether his god will, and how he can, help him, but when he becomes interested to learn how the gods live and what they experience. The second is enlightenment. Primitive religiosity demands tangible manifestations of the intervening presence of God and finds them in lightning, thunder, eclipses, and apparitions. Enlightenment furnishes proof that phenomena of this kind may be explained from 'natural' causes and thus do not by any means presuppose a divine will. This does not as yet imply that there are no gods; but it does imply the elimination of that manifest tie between the deity and the world of man, by which faith time and again regains the certainty of its own reality. The third line is speculation. Reflection takes possession of faith as well as the practices of the cult and demonstrates without effort the inadequacy of both. The god who intervenes here and there as a helper and whom people were fond to think of in the shape of a perfect human being is 'purified' into a shapeless being which from the very beginning is omnipresent and all-knowing. Sacrifice becomes pointless, partly because what matters is not the material

gift but the state of mind, partly because it would be absurd to think mortal man could offer a present to a deity in control of the universe. Temples become pointless, for clearly God does not dwell in a house but everywhere. Prayers become pointless, for in any case God knows better than man what man needs. It is difficult to ward off trains of thought of this hue; yet we may suppose that it is this very complex of ideas which will destroy the substance of living piety much more forcefully than myth and enlightenment and which, as it were, caused faith to cave in. This process is completed in all its essentials at the height of the classical period, but it is unmistakable that it begins already with Homer.

Nilsson's book does not have much to say about it, yet it is the totality of the materials so magnificently organised and interpreted by Nilsson which forces us to infer its existence. It is actually a very simple reflection that yields this conclusion. The amount of material which Nilsson presents with regard to cult forms, sacrifices, and festivals is at first blush immensely large and impressive. But let us pose two questions. Let us give the first one a positive turn: Whence do we know of all this? The second question must be phrased in the negative: How much would we know of all this if we had but Thucydides or Plato and Aristotle to consult? First of all: Is it mere chance that we have come to know the overwhelming majority of cultic data from scholiasts, lexicographers, and from the *Periegesis* of Pausanias, that is to say, from a markedly learned type of literature? It was in the Hellenistic period that the sentimental

romanticist and the scholarly collector prepared to ferret out and register folkloristic curios in all parts of Greece and in all classical authors; whether the enthusiasm for rare antiquities always was in a position to judge the finds correctly, is a separate and secondary question. What matters above all is the fact that the material from which in our time the student of religion has to work comes from learned collections and not from the living religion. Aeschylus already was fond of weaving obtrusively abstruse cult forms as curios into his plays (where they were duly registered by the Hellenistic scholars), and Pausanias would report like phenomena for Arcadia; but for the most part we do not have any means whatever of knowing in which wise and when those cults were actually practised from genuine faith. This conclusion is confirmed by our second principal question: It is obvious that in the intellectual universe of Thucydides or Plato the infinite variety of cultic religion plays a very minor role. There is a grotesque discrepancy between what the authors of the fifth and fourth centuries tell us about the actual cultic practices of their day and the information communicated to us by retrospective scholarship of all kinds.

Let us not enlarge on this consideration. We merely had to emphasise that the invaluable material which Nilsson's book spreads out before us can be rightly understood only when attention is given to provenance and when we reflect that even the most learned Hellenistic book 'On the Gods' can yield information regarding the real faith of the Hellenes only very indirectly

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and within narrow limits. Our very dependence on Hellenistic scholarship for information about the archaic and classical phases of religion is one of the most striking symptoms of that inner hollowness of Greek religion even in its earlier period of which we have spoken before.

It is true that the situation changes within the Hellenistic period. The romantic mood that goes out to search for ancient cultic forms actually did induce to a certain extent a renewal of true religious feeling. There were other contributory factors (Oriental influence, etc.). So we shall have to qualify or to modify our statements when we come to the centuries after Alexander. The overall view remains: Never in any civilisation did religion find itself from the beginning and all through its history in as precarious a

situation as it did in Greece. It is this fact that constitutes its unassailable individuality. Even though Nilsson's great work gives more space to mere cultic practices than to the inquiry into the faith and even though Nilsson deliberately adopts prudent formulations and only rarely calls attention to the problems lurking in the background, he has achieved a masterpiece which no investigator will be able to dispense with. Nothing better could have happened to research in this exceedingly difficult field than that we now possess two books of the first order that are as perfectly complementary as Wilamowitz' *Der Glaube der Hellenen* and Nilsson's *magnum opus*. So it should not be long before the countless problems still awaiting their solution will be attacked with success.