Introduction

It is not so much the limits of our knowledge as the superabundance of what can be known that makes an attempt to explain man's religious behavior an almost hopeless enterprise. The mass of available data and interpretation has long exceeded the limits of what an individual can grasp and assimilate. Perhaps this stream of information will soon be ordered and surveyed through a collective effort using computers, but as long as intellectual independence prevails and an individual must seek to orient himself within his own world, he may—indeed, he must—take the risk of projecting a model of his situation and reducing a confusing multiplicity into a comprehensible form.

A philologist who starts from ancient Greek texts and attempts to find biological, psychological, and sociological explanations for religious phenomena naturally runs the risk of juggling too many balls at once and dropping them all. And if it is strange for a philologist to venture beyond scrupulous discussion of his texts, psychology and sociology are just as reluctant to burden their analyses of contemporary phenomena with an historical perspective stretching back to antiquity and beyond. There is a danger that important biological, psychological, and ethnological findings be overlooked, just as can happen with archaeological finds, and it is hardly possible for the non-specialist to give the Near Eastern evidence the expert treatment it requires. Yet we must not assume that all subjects fit neatly within the limits of a particular discipline. Even philology depends on a biologically, psychologically, and sociologically determined environment and tradition to provide its basis for understanding. And just as biology acquired an historical dimension with the concept of evolution,[1] so sociology, like psychology before it, should accept the notion that

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[1]H. Diels, *Internationale Wochenshrift* 3 (1909), 890, discussed the "historicizing of nature" through Darwin's theory.

human society is shaped by the past and can be understood only by examining its development over long periods of time.

Of course, the act of understanding itself presents us with problems that have been widely discussed. If by "understanding" we mean that the outside world will ultimately correspond to our expectations and thought structures, then we admit that the diversity of that world is perceived as though through a predetermined filter and that there will be different kinds of understanding, distinguished according to individuals and groups. But if reality were not anthropomorphically or at least intellectually determined, then understanding in a personal sense would be altogether impossible. The possibility remains of using our consciousness, fully aware of these problems, to unravel the course of received tradition,[2] and to adapt the structures of understanding to the ever-new realities with which we are confronted and to which man, whether he likes it or not, remains tied. Our task is to seek the perspectives that give us the broadest and clearest view, to project a model that accounts for the various areas of experience as comprehensively as possible and that is susceptible to frequent factual verification. We cannot hope that our model will be a finished product; it is merely an attempt set forward for discussion, with full knowledge of its tentative nature.

Every religion aspires to the absolute. Its claims, when seen from within, make it self-sufficient. It establishes and explains, but needs no explanation. Within this sphere of power, any discussion about religion will almost automatically become a religious pronouncement, especially as the essence of religion is an attempt at expression and communication. In this way, however, religion becomes the agent and the medium of communication rather than its subject. This is precisely why religious discussion about religion is effective, for it finds resonance in nearly everyone. Thus, even when the seriousness of religious practice is replaced by the ambiguous and non-binding "as if" of emotional understanding, this mode of discourse remains entirely respectable even in a secularized society.

The opposite extreme in the study of religion is likewise generally accepted and carries no risk: this is the lexicographical documentation and arrangement of the details that have been observed and transmitted to us from the past. And yet a lexicon will not give us an understanding of the language if the grammar is unknown or disregarded and if the practice under discussion has not been under-

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[2]For the fundamental philosophical treatment see H. G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (1965)².

stood. Thus, precisely because religious phenomena seem more and more to elude the modern world's grasp, mere gathering of material can shed no more light on them than can the uncontrolled resonances of emotional understanding.

Especially when dealing with foreign or extinct religions, an outsider finds himself confronted, as it were, with a strange and unknown language: to understand it, he must translate it. This means first of all that there should be no ambiguity about the language into which one translates. To vacillate between transformation and imitation will produce the kind of misunderstandings that do, in fact, dominate many controversies in the study of religion. If one tries to translate one religion into the language of another, one finds, just as in working with ordinary languages of different nations, that this is only possible to a limited degree. Equivalent expressions will frequently be lacking, due to the respective differences in religious practice and in living conditions. If we take up foreign words such as *totem*, *tabu*, and *mana*, their meaning remains unclear or changes according to the interpreter's intent. If we invent new concepts such as *vegetation spirit* or *Year Daemon*,[3] their legitimacy remains a matter of dispute, especially if it is unclear at what point the concept becomes a new myth itself.

The language that has proved the most generally understood and cross-cultural is that of secularized scholarship. Its practice today is determined by science in its broadest sense, its system of rules by the laws of logic. It may, of course, seem the most questionable endeavor of all to try to translate religious phenomena into this language; by its self-conception, a religion must deny that such explanations are possible. However, scholarship is free to study even the rejection of knowledge and repudiation of independent thought, for scholarship, in attempting to understand the world, has the broader perspective here and cannot abstain from analyzing the worldwide fact of religion. This is not a hopeless undertaking.[4] However, a discussion of religion must then be anything but religious.

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[3] W. Mannhardt, *Die Korndämonen* (1868); Harrison (1927) 331–34. Especially dangerous is the little word *is*, which confounds translation, allegory, classification, and ontological or psychological realization. See, for instance, Nilsson (1906) 27: "wenn der Stier des Zeus Sosipolis ein Korngeist ist, muss der des Zeus Polieus es auch sein."

[4] E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion* (1965), offers a survey with penetrating criticism that leads to the conclusion that the "believer" is superior to the "nonbeliever" (121). Still fundamental, however, is E. Durkheim's *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (1912). Psychoanalytical enterprises—most recently La Barre (1970)—are also to be taken seriously.

We shall examine religion as an historical and social phenome-
non, as the medium of tradition and communication among men.
This contradicts the common assumptions, if not the practical reality,
of the dominant religious tradition in the West, i.e., Christianity,
which views the individual's encounter with the one God, and his
subsequent salvation, as the only relevant facts. This perspective has
determined the common scholarly definition of religion as, for in-
stance, "man's experiential encounter with the sacred and his action
in response to the sacred."[5] And yet individual religions exist in typi-
cal and persisting forms precisely because very little unforeseen spon-
taneity and innovation occur in them. To the extent that we find a
"personal encounter with the sacred," it is performed according to a
traditional method and with pedagogical intent. Only those who can
attest to a genuine encounter are accepted. The pre-Christian reli-
gions proclaimed with the utmost conviction that only ancestral tradi-
tion could guarantee the legitimacy of religion. Thus, through his ora-
cle, the Delphic god always sanctioned rites "according to the custom
of the city"; and the Boeotian was speaking for many when he re-
marked, in regard to a strange fish-sacrifice at Lake Copais, "There is
just one thing I know: that one must maintain the ancestral customs
and that it would be improper to excuse oneself for this before
others."[6]

Ancient Greek religion is distinguished neither by extreme antiq-
uity nor by a great wealth of source material. It is far younger than
either the Egyptian or Sumerian tradition, and in terms of accessibil-
ity it cannot even begin to compete with a living religion. In spite of
this, the general problems in the study of religion have been repeat-
edly linked to research on the religion of the Greeks. This can hardly
be a coincidental offshoot of the once-ubiquitous humanistic tradi-
tion. If, rather, we take both age and accessibility into account simul-
taneously, the ancient Greek religion assumes a unique position after
all: among the most ancient forms of religion, it is still the most com-
prehensible and the one that can be observed from the greatest num-
ber of perspectives. For it never disappeared entirely, but remained

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[5] G. Mensching, *Die grossen Nichtchristlichen Religionen unserer Zeit* (1954), 13; *RGG*³ V
961; cf. F. Heiler, *Erscheinungsformen und Wesen der Religion* (1961), 562: "Umgang mit
dem Heiligen."

[6] Agatharchides, Ath. 297d; νόμῳ πόλεως Xen. *Mem.* 1.3.1, 4.3.16, and cf. Hes. fr. 322;
Eur. *Bacch.* 201–204; Plat. *Leg.* 738b–d; Cotta in Cic. *Nat. deor.* 3.5, 9; Cic. *Leg.* 2.40; Cic.
Har. resp. 18–19. Likewise, early Christianity felt obliged to its ancestors: οὐκ ἀρεῖς τὴν
χεῖρά σου ἀπὸ τοῦ υἱοῦ σου ἢ ἀπὸ τῆς θυγατρός σου, ἀλλὰ ἀπὸ νεότητος διδάξεις τὸν
φόβον τοῦ θεοῦ (*Didache* 4.9).

active, even if in strange transformations, from superstition and literary tradition to liturgical practice and Christian theology. Only in ancient Greek religion do we find an uninterrupted tradition of the greatest antiquity in a highly refined culture, unsurpassed in its intellectual and artistic achievement. It was due to this union of antiquity with sophistication that the Greeks were the first systematically to call religion into question. Seen from that distance and from changing perspectives, the phenomenon may come into sharper relief.

In the following studies, the Greek tradition will hold center stage, though it is hoped that we will illuminate important stages in the mainstream of human development as well. We will not try to explain phenomena by amassing "primitive" material for comparison, stripped of its context and hence all the more difficult to understand. Rather, we shall proceed from a consistent historical perspective stretching back to man's beginnings. We will not place great weight on the individuality of Greek culture, regardless of how praiseworthy it may be; the anthropological aspect outweighs the humanistic. But it is precisely here that both the primeval roots and the lucidity of the Greek material becomes evident. It can serve, as it were, as a mirror in which the basic orders of life, lying far behind us, become visible with an almost classical clarity.

We shall try to combine this consistent historical perspective with a functional one. Within historical reality, religion is a stabilizing factor of the first order in society. As such it appears in its enduring aspect, always a given tradition which is modified time and again but never replaced by something entirely new. As it unfolds within the many-faceted play of social forces, various traditions unite, thereby asserting and perpetuating themselves or languishing and dying out. In this respect, religion, while tied to social reality, does not simply reflect that reality; it takes little account of society's swift changes, especially those regarding economic conditions. Rather, it seems to deal with more fundamental layers of communal human life and with its psychological preconditions, which have changed only slightly from the earliest times until now. If religious forms have often provided a focal point for new social and economic developments, they were more a prerequisite than a consequence of these developments.[7]

At the core of our study are the rituals, together with the mythic

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[7] Max Weber, in his famous study, demonstrated the influence of Calvinism on capitalism (*Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus, Ges. Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie* I [1920], 17–206), but Calvinism cannot conversely be explained by way of capitalism.

traditions relating to them. Our aim is to identify and to understand relationships and structures that recur in various guises but always bind certain elements together in the same way.[8] We shall consciously refrain from trying to arrange the material according to a mathematical model. The elements are, on the one hand, so complex and, on the other, so directly understandable that it would be wrong to reduce them to a yes/no pattern, thus making them so complicated that they would be obscured. Killing and eating, virgins, mothers and fathers —these basic configurations of human life are more easily grasped through experience than through logical analysis, just as the structure of a ritual and of a mythic tale unfolds in linear time and cannot be represented by a system of reversible permutations. Thus, the sacrificial ritual moves from preparation through the "unspeakable" central point to the act of "setting up" an order, a pattern which can be repeated but not reversed.

The first chapter deals with basic principles and could stand on its own, although it would then probably seem too dogmatic and speculative. It pulls together the various threads that appear in the case studies of the subsequent chapters. By spelling out the consequences, it lays the foundation that is then assumed for the rest of the book. The hypothesis and the application confirm one another, even though neither is quite self-sufficient. Following this attempt to analyze the complex of hunting, sacrifice, and funerary ritual both historically and functionally, we turn to an interpretation of groups of Greek festival rites under various aspects. We examine, on the one hand, the divisions and interactions of individual groups at the sacrifice of a ram and, on the other, the sequence of dissolution and restoration of the order of life, from the city festivals to the Dionysiac orgies. The sacrificial structure of guilt incurred and subsequent restitution also appears in the consumption of wine at the oldest festival of Dionysus; and the mysteries of the grain goddess Demeter appear to be likewise organized by the rhythm of the sacrificial rites. This sequence is not to be understood as historical stratigraphy. It is increasingly difficult to separate Mediterranean, Near Eastern, and Eurasian elements, and to distinguish Greek from pre-Greek. The structures are perhaps too basic to follow ethnic distinctions.

The aim of our presentation is to set out the phenomena in a per-

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[8]The following analyses were begun and conducted largely without reference to C. Lévi-Strauss's *Anthropologie structurale* (1958; *Mythologiques* I–IV [1964–1971]; *Anthropologie structurale deux* [1973]). For a closer look at structuralism, see Burkert (1979) 5–14.

spicuous and understandable form. This requires a practicable brevity and limitation of scope, a selective treatment of the boundless mass of material. It would be impossible to discuss all questions in detail or refer exhaustively to all specialized secondary literature. We have attempted instead to refer to what is basic and what is new. The most important sources are cited, but the list is by no means exhaustive. We refer the reader to the standard works of Preller-Robert, Deubner and Nilsson, Farnell and Cook for more complete documentation.

The aspects of Greek religion and of humanity that emerge in this study are not those which are particularly edifying, not the ideal or the most likable traits of Greek culture. Yet we can invoke the Delphic god's injuction that mankind should see itself with absolute clarity, no illusions: Γνῶθι σαυτόν.