

BOOK REVIEW

Theologies of Ancient Greek Religion. Edited by ESTHER EIDINOW, JULIA KINDT, and ROBIN OSBORNE. Cambridge, UK.: Cambridge University Press, 2016. Pp.ix + 423. Hardcover, \$120.00. ISBN 978-1-107-15347-9.

Since the days of Constantine, “theology” has smacked of Christian creeds and councils, doctrines and dogmas. Not surprisingly, then, contemporary classical scholarship typically eschews the term. This impressive volume of fifteen essays, inspired by a 2012 conference at Cambridge, reminds us that *in the beginning it was not so* (Mt. 19:8). Long before its Christian connotations, *theologia*—whose first attestation dates to Plato’s *Republic* (379a5)—had a rich Greek currency, making it a “perfectly good pagan word,” as Albert Henrichs quips (1). In recounting the “story of theology” (Chapter 2), Julia Kindt explains how previous generations of scholars (Ernest Renan and Erwin Rohde, Jane Ellen Harrison and Gilbert Murray) had no problem privileging the theological lens. This hermeneutic fell out of favor in the late twentieth century, with the rise of structuralism and the pragmatic turn (21). Since then, Walter Burkert’s “polis religion” has largely carried the day.

Unfortunately, this predominant line of scholarship distorts the picture by sidelining non-political forms of theological discourse. Through her comparative reading of divine conflict in Hesiod’s *Theogony* and Homer’s “Theomachia” (*Iliad* 21), Barbara Graziosi underscores the need for further theological reflection on the family, for example. In Chapter 4, Renaud Gagné explores the “theologies of offerings” at work in the *anathēmata* of the Cypselid and Mermnad dynasties. To focus solely on the political dimensions of the inscriptions is to miss the sophisticated ways in which later writers—Theognis, Pindar, Bacchylides, and Herodotus—variously re-imagine and re-inscribe the offerings’ divine significance.

Chapters 5–7 take up different forms of theological appropriation. Shaul Tor shows how Heraclitus (B93) intentionally imitates the Apollonian mode of communication, thus encouraging the “attuned inquirer” to do theology (95). Eric Csapo then traces how Old Comedy adopts the personality of Dionysus Eleuthereus so as to shroud the genre’s dangerous political invective with the

weight of religious tradition. In Chapter 7, Simon Goldhill challenges the Christian reading of Attic tragedy rampant in Victorian age scholarship—and still subtly at work today. Christianity’s linear teleology deforms the “polytheistic narrative structure,” with its very different sense of divine causation (169).

Within this polytheistic structure, the boundary between divine and human activity often proves difficult to decipher. Hannah Willey walks us down this line in her chapter on “ancient Greek conceptions of lawgiving,” marked by a dynamic collaboration between mortal and divine agency. In Chapter 9, Esther Eidinow plumbs the unsettling “dark side” of this uncertain relationship (230). Using *phthonos* as a case study for the embedded nature of popular theologies, she exposes the terrifying gap between human (predictable) and divine (unpredictable) reciprocity. At the same time, as Robin Osborne points out (Chapter 10), ritualistic sacrifice rests upon a basic homology between gods and men: both take nourishment and pleasure from the sacrificial offering (247). The cultic calendars at Cos and Mykonos display how sacrifice within a polytheistic religious economy at once unifies and differentiates the divine and human communities.

How exactly do mortals imagine this divine community, both distant and present in their midst? In Chapter 11, Milette Gaifman pursues this line of inquiry by casting a theological eye on classical Greek art. Examples from vase painting (Amsterdam krater no.2579) and sculptural relief (Parthenon metope, North 25) reveal a complex, often ambiguous rapport among suppliants, divinities, and sacred images. This iconic, visible nature of divinity, strikingly present in the sanctuary, disappears in the Athenian assembly. The forensic evidence, marshalled by Gunther Martin (Chapter 12), suggests that the gods preside over the assembly with a protective, yet peripheral role, one that underscores civic responsibility.

The concluding chapters consider the theological impact of Plato’s philosophical tradition and the transition from Graeco-Roman to Christian religion. By examining Plato’s heuristic approach to myth, Rick Benitez problematizes the secularist reading that casts him as a natural philosopher in the Aristotelian mold. George Boys-Stones (Chapter 14) develops this trajectory, demonstrating the inherent religiosity of Platonic metaphysics through a lengthy fragment from Atticus on providence (*pronoia*). In a final chapter that nicely recapitulates important themes, Peter Van Nuffelen unearths the theological

presuppositions at work behind modern (“pagan monotheism”) and ancient (Macrobius’s *Saturnalia*) theories of (dis)continuity.

In terms of contribution, the volume advances the *status quaestionis* by putting theology back on “the radar of scholarly interest” (19). With the exception of a few minor infelicities, the text is clean, clear, and complete. As for limitations, the editors concede in their introduction that the vast “heterogeneity” of sources precludes a systematic treatment, inevitably leaving various lacunae (2–3). The risk with this approach, of course, is that the distinct chapters, arranged in “broadly chronological” order, can at times seem isolated or self-contained. Certain editorial choices could have better integrated the selections. There is an inconsistency, for example, among (and sometimes within) individual chapters on the provision and translation of Greek text. Finding a way to group related chapters together in larger subsections (Part One, Part Two, etc.) may have further elucidated the internal logic of the work. At the same time, the discrete nature of the chapters speaks to the irreducible multiplicity at the heart of Greek polytheism. Given the sheer spectrum of theological questions and methods, the volume rightly privileges plurality (*theologies*) in the title and throughout. What unifies the text is not a simple “one-size-fits-all definition” but rather the consistent, compelling, and cross-disciplinary conviction that to “re-theologize” is to renew our study of ancient Greek religion: challenging accepted assumptions, transcending old categories, and disclosing new, promising paths for future scholarship (3, 356).

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