This sober book upsets our conception of Hellenistic religion, and therefore alters our understanding of the Hellenistic age. Seventy years ago, W.W. Tarn wrote,

'It has been truly said that in the religious sphere the only vital things in Hellenism were philosophy and the Oriental religions. ... the Olympians ... belonged to, and fell with, the city state; philosophy killed them for the educated, individualism for the common man; he was no longer part of the city ... but wanted something that spoke to himself. ... Greece was ready to adopt the gods of the foreigner. ... Individualism shewed itself in the enormous outburst of private associations. ... A dominant factor of the time was the striving after one god. ... very typically Hellenistic was a great expansion of syncretism.' (Hellenistic Civilisation¹ [London, 1927], 277-280).

So we all believed. Wrongly.

Mikalson (M) first sketches Athenian civic religion after the defeat at Chaeronea, based on Lycurgus' speech Against Leocrates, and on his programme of rebuilding Athens' strength, and shows both that the 'official' religion was potent and flourishing and that its maintenance was as important in Lycurgus' programme as were the new shipsheds in the Piraeus, the stockpiles of munitions, and the unprecedented fiscal surpluses which filled the treasury. He then follows Athens' history for the next quarter millennium, till Sulla's sack of the city in 86 BC, through alternating periods of Macedonian control and nominal freedom, and shows how, in each period of 'freedom', there was a determined and largely successful effort to restore the official
religion to its classical form. The evidence comes almost entirely from inscriptions, and therefore cannot give us insight into the private beliefs of individual Athenians, but it shows beyond doubt that Athenian taxpayers supported politicians who expended substantial sums on repairing shrines and maintaining, restoring and even extending festivals in honour of the traditional gods and heroes of Attica.

M also shows how little influence the philosophers had on the practice of religion; most of them were foreigners, and therefore excluded from sharing in Athenian cults, but even Demetrius of Phalerum, who ruled Athens for ten years under Cassander (317-307 BC), left no significant mark. Much more important were the Atthidographers, culminating in the work of Philochorus (died c. 263 BC), who recorded Athens' local history and traditions, and thereby also codified the stories behind Athenian cults and ceremonies.

'Oriental' cults entered the official religion surprisingly late: despite the foundation of an Isis temple, for the Egyptian community in the Piraeus, before 333/2, it is two centuries later that there is the first clear evidence for Athenians worshipping her and Sarapis in Attica. M gives a full list of the 'private' cult associations known from Attica before c. 200 BC (145-151), twenty four in all, for deities ranging from the Thracian Bendis to Zeus Soter; of these, Ammon, Bendis and the Mother of the Gods were the only non-Athenian gods with Athenian worshippers, and most of the associations, whether composed of Athenians or non-Athenians, had only a brief existence, in contrast with the permanence of the traditional cults.

Deification of Alexander the Great and heroization of his friend Hephaestion met with strong opposition in Athens; in contrast, when Demetrius Poliorcetes 'liberated' the city in 307 and restored democracy, the Athenians spontaneously deified both him and his father Antigonus Monophthalmus, and offered prayers not only 'for' them, but 'to' them—their power, after all,
was evident and effective, while the Olympians had not been able to defend even their own sanctuaries. But the twenty stormy years until the Athenians were finally rid of Demetrius’ power in 287 not only convinced them to abolish all traces of ruler cult—only the two honorific tribes, Antigonis and Demetrias, remained—but also kept them from including any later liberator or benefactor in the state cult: Diogenes, who restored the Piraeus to Athens in 229, received perpetual honours as a ‘benefactor’, but cult, it seems, only from the ephebes; and Ptolemy III and Attalus I were honoured by the new tribes ‘Ptolemais’ and ‘Attalis’, but not by cult.

The Macedonian control of the Piraeus for nearly all the period 322-229 BC not only partitioned Attica into two practically separate states but also profoundly affected its religious developments. Support for cults centred in the Piraeus died away in the Athenian state, and new ones introduced from overseas could not take root there.

Philip V’s devastation of the Attic countryside in 201 BC not only destroyed the rural sanctuaries but, it seems, the rural cults based there, so that in the second century, Athenian official cult—apart from traditional celebrations such as the Eleusinian Mysteries and the worship of the hero Amphaiaraus at Oropus—was centred on Athens. Now, under the shadow of Rome and with no hope of effective independence, the Athenians restored, revived, perhaps even invented, festivals which celebrated their glorious past: the exploits of Theseus and his unification of Attica, and the Athenian victories against the Persians.

The Romans’ gift of Delos to Athens in 167 opened the gates to radical change. The Athenians expelled the Delians, and from then the island was inhabited by immigrants, who brought their own gods with them and had no inherited links with its traditional cults. Of course the Athenians maintained the worship of Delos’ patron gods, Apollo, Artemis and Leto, but they re-organised and apparently ‘bureaucratised’ Delos’ official cults,
as M makes clear (218-232). On Delos we do find the ‘typical’ Hellenistic developments, of syncretism, and the acceptance of ‘exotic gods’ (Athenians there became priests not only of Isis and Sarapis, but of Hadad and Atargatis too). Inevitably, such developments then spread to Attica, and there is evidence for Athenian worshippers of ‘Syrian Aphrodite’ and of the ‘Great Gods’—as well as of Isis and Sarapis. But there is no sign of exclusive devotion to a single deity or group of deities, or of rejection of the traditional cult.

M establishes all this clearly and as fully as the limited and one-sided evidence allows. His book does of course have some faults, such as repeatedly using the ugly neologism ‘honoree’ for ‘honorand’, and once ‘disinterested’ for ‘uninterested’ (124). He is also rather inconsistent about the extent of continuing Athenian confidence in their traditional gods after they had failed to provide victory or even security (compare 51, 95, and 135). But these are trivial blemishes in a work which convincingly portrays Athenian religion, throughout the Hellenistic age, as dominated by the desire for stability and for retaining the traditional forms. Obviously there were changes, but these were gradual and evolutionary, just as changes in the archaic and classical periods had been: there is no sign of a rejection of the Olympians or search for consolation and salvation in exotic cults, nor of philosophically based syncretism, monotheism or atheism.

M’s book not only alters our understanding about his subject, it also makes us think of related matters. For example, did such conservative, even nostalgic, religious practices continue under Roman rule? Was Varro the Athidographer of Rome? Did the repeated ‘restorations’ of traditional religion at Athens (and in other old Greek states?) provide the model for Augustus’ revolutionary ‘restoration’ of Roman official religion? Were the great ancient cities of Ionia, such as Ephesus and Smyrna, more like Athens or like Athenian-controlled Delos in Hellenistic times? M has shown how little can be taken for granted, how
much needs critical examination; there is work to be done.

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