One tends to think of reason and logic in association with the ancient Greeks. Their capacity for rational investigation sets them apart from other ancient civilizations. Yet alongside achievements in philosophy, science and the arts, there was no less an achievement in the sphere of religion, where the Greeks equally sought to understand and control unseen and often frightening forces in the world around them. Their method was not like that of (say) Christianity or Islam. No revealed text, no dogma, no incontrovertible standard underlay their system, which was of course polytheistic rather than monotheistic. Moreover, their gods and goddesses were not moral paragons or guardians, interested in the moral behaviour of their mortal worshippers. Zeus and his family were subject to very human passions and capable of unreasonable and unfair acts, as is obvious from the stories of Greek mythology.

Robert Parker (P) limits the scope of his study to the officially recognized gods of Athenian public worship. In some ways this is a shame. Apart from begging the question about the propriety of separating 'public' from 'private' (on which P has some interesting things to say, 5-7), it eliminates the huge variety of other deities of the home, city and countryside which were certainly an important part of the religious experience of the ancient Athenians. Their importance points to a more irrational mindset than commentators tend to convey in writing about the ancient Greeks. It also means that more peripheral or less emphasized aspects of Greek religion, such as magic practices, curse tablets, talismans and dreams, are not covered. Instead, P is interested in religion as a product of society, i.e. in the way that religion unifies and defines but also stratifies and is manipulated by a social group. The concentration is upon practice rather than belief—more what the Athenians did and how they organized
revelations themselves than what they thought. This approach, in which religion is essentially a way of recognizing and structuring power in a society, derives ultimately from Durkheim’s view (‘the great sociologist’s revolutionary thesis’) that ‘religion is something eminently social’ (1). Accordingly, when there is political or social change, public religion is profoundly affected. P shows how socio-political change in the Athenian polis left its mark on the rituals and festivals of Athenian public religion. This was an evolutionary process, marked by the tenacious persistence of traditional rituals, and a rather surprising consistency in the makeup of priestly groups.

P’s history begins with a survey of the fragments of evidence for religious life at Athens in the eighth century BC (17-26). Little can be said, except for worship on mountain peaks and at the tombs of heroes, both of which flourished in the eighth and seventh centuries alike (29-42 and Map I). On the latter, P does well to emphasize the crystallization of the category of heroes in this period (39). A sense of new energy, or of ‘transformation’ (43), comes in the early sixth century with the growth in Athenian power and attendant social problems of that period. Solon sought to promote unity through religion by placing limits on funeral display (49-50) and on the amount that could be spent on particular gods. These were recognized methods for winning fame and support, and for exerting religious control. Such measures were reinforced by the establishment of a calendar of sacrifices which set out the ‘division of ritual privileges and responsibilities’ (52).

Solon’s reforms also affected the power of the priesthoods as state control over religion was asserted against that of groups with ‘an aristocratic coloration’ (62: the degree of aristocratic privilege turns out to be a complicated issue). Athenian priesthoods, devoted to different gods and cultic practices, were passed down from one generation to the next within pseudo-familial groups, who believed that the various priestly lines traced back to a common ancestor. This belief helped the priest-clans identify with one another and secure their power. Though
there are many uncertainties, P is inclined to support the traditional view that Solon's political reforms, which emphasized wealth instead of birth, weakened the link between religious authority and political power. This made membership of a *genos* less important, but did not necessarily change the nature of its composition.

Religion under the Pisistratids was equally a product of the unifying and stratifying forces of the day. P emphasizes continuity of traditional practices and tends to downplay the role of the Pisistratids themselves in the religious development of Athens, but there was certainly a lot of innovative activity during this period, such as the foundation of important temples and altars and the development of a number of festivals. Prominent among these were the Dionysia and the Panathenaia. These festivals, financed by the *polis* and an expression of the power of the city-state, were often spectacular affairs involving candlelit vigils, drunken orgies, and mysterious rites which ended with large quantities of meat being consumed by the citizens of Athens (75-101).

As Athenian rulers continued to stress the competence of the *demos* in civic matters of all kinds, it was not long before religious competence was increasingly relinquished to the many—which meant 'the partial supersession of the *gene*' (125). By the mid-fifth century, proposals concerning public sacrifices, prayers, processions and oracles were voted on by the people; and most priesthoods, boards of temple treasurers and sanctuary supervisors were chosen by lot. Aristocrats were hit with compulsory 'liturgies'.

P is particularly interesting on the success of transplanted foreign gods, whose presence in Athens, permitted by the state, is an index to the acceptance of outsiders into the *polis* (142 ff., 152 ff.), although he cautions characteristically that 'the contribution of actual foreigners to the diffusion of "foreign" cults is far from clear' (160). Traders and craftsmen from the East
brought with them deities like Asclepius, Cybele, Pan, Orpheus and the Egyptian Isis. On the other hand, the otherwise tolerant Athenians could react sharply against foreign deities if they perceived a threat to the established social order. Phryne (162), for example, was publicly accused of leading ‘shameless revels’, introducing a new god and assembling illicit worshippers (thiasoi).

In this vein, of course, the most famous case was that of Socrates (199-217). Many scholars have seen the social and political disorder of the later fifth century as the background to Socrates’ condemnation in 399 BC, i.e. they argue that Socrates’ crime was perceived fundamentally as a political one in that he was a friend of those who undermined the democracy and replaced it with a harsh oligarchy. The religious charge was a way of achieving the desired political end. By contrast, P believes that the Athenians might have reasoned things the other way around (202, 215). In other words, they could have felt that Socrates tilted at the traditional religious order, and that this represented a threat to the social and political order. The problem resided in Socrates’ use of reason and argument to decide ethical problems, for by doing so he essentially declared himself an atheist. The Sophists likewise showed a tendency towards atheism, so perhaps P is right that the end of the fifth century was a time of profound religious crisis. This would help to explain why the usual tolerant attitude was overcome by the desire to prosecute and even execute.

The final two (of twelve) chapters deal with the fourth century (218-55) and beyond (256-81), when personifications or abstractions were worshipped autonomously from the world of the Olympians (236), when Lycurgus the orator insisted on the prime importance of cult and myth in the life of the city (243), when cult was paid to living men (256 ff.), when the wasteful liturgies were abolished (268), and when the vast majority of hero-cults disappear permanently from view in the third century with the loss of the deme calendars (275). In drawing his history to a close,
P notes the absence of dividing lines throughout, and so takes his cue from the decline in evidence which becomes particularly noticeable in the first half of the third century (280); the death of Philochorus in the 260s is seen as a fitting final moment (281).

*Athenian Religion* is both interesting and important. It is also erudite and even-handed in its treatment of opposing viewpoints (esp. 56-66). These are positive features, to be sure, but not perhaps for beginners or general readers. P’s thesis about religion as a product of the socio-political environment is in line with revisionist scholarly approaches of the last twenty years or so and is argued with great confidence and care. His analysis of inscriptions is often subtle and acute. The problem is that it is all so rational, so political, at least as presented by P. That religion and society are interrelated is significant, but religion also has a life of its own, a capacity for stirring the emotions quite irrationally, and often a longevity beyond immediate social conditions. P himself downplays the role of the Pisistratids, and his analysis of Socrates’ trial could be bolstered with a dose of paranoid irrationality. Athena was worshipped in other parts of Greece, and her worship goes back into the Bronze Age, as with other Olympians. If, therefore, similar religious practices occur in vastly different social settings, this should serve to make one wonder about the closeness of the interrelationship between religion and socio-political conditions. At the very least it would seem that there are other factors to consider. P’s thoughts on this side of Athenian religion would be equally as interesting as those he has furnished in the present book.

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