

THE STORY OF CIVILIZATION
II

*The
Life
of Greece*



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*A History of Greek Government, Industry, Manners,
Morals, Religion, Philosophy, Science, Literature and Art
from the Earliest Times to the Roman Conquest*

The Gods of Greece

I. THE SOURCES OF POLYTHEISM

WHEN we look for unifying elements in the civilization of these scattered cities we find essentially five: a common language, with local dialects; a common intellectual life, in which only major figures in literature, philosophy, and science are known far beyond their political frontiers; a common passion for athletics, finding outlet in municipal and interstate games; a love of beauty locally expressed in forms of art common to all the Greek communities; and a partly common religious ritual and belief.

Religion divided the cities as much as it united them. Under the polite and general worship of the remote Olympians lay the intenser cults of local deities and powers who served no vassalage to Zeus. Tribal and political separatism nourished polytheism, and made monotheism impossible. In the early days every family had its own god; to him the divine fire burned unextinguished at the hearth, and to him offerings of food and wine were made before every meal. This holy communion, or sharing of food with the god, was the basic and primary act of religion in the home. Birth, marriage, and death were sanctified into sacraments by ancient ritual before the sacred fire; and in this way religion suffused a mystic poetry and a stabilizing solemnity over the elemental events of human life. In like manner the gens, the phratry, the tribe, and the city had each its special god. Athens worshiped Athena, Eleusis Demeter, Samos Hera, Ephesus Artemis, Poseidonia Poseidon. The center and summit of the city was the shrine of the city god; participation in the worship of the god was the sign, the privilege, and the requisite of citizenship. When the city marched out to war it carried the form and emblem of its god in the forefront of the troops, and no important step was taken without consulting him through divination. In return he fought for the city, and sometimes seemed to appear at the head or above the spears of the soldiers; victory was the conquest not only of a city by a city but of a god by a god. The city, like the family or the tribe, kept always burning, at a public altar in the prytaneum or town hall, a sacred fire symbolizing the mystically potent and persistent life of the city's founders

and heroes; and periodically the citizens partook of a common meal before this fire. Just as in the family the father was also the priest, so in the Greek city the chief magistrate or archon was the high priest of the state religion, and all his powers and actions were sanctified by the god. By this conscription of the supernatural, man was tamed from a hunter into a citizen.

Liberated by local independence, the religious imagination of Greece produced a luxuriant mythology and a populous pantheon. Every object or force of earth or sky, every blessing and every terror, every quality—even the vices—of mankind was personified as a deity, usually in human form; no other religion has ever been so anthropomorphic as the Greek. Every craft, profession, and art had its divinity, or, as we should say, its patron saint; and in addition there were demons, harpies, furies, fairies, gorgons, sirens, nymphs, almost as numerous as the mortals of the earth. The old question—is religion created by priests?—is here settled; it is incredible that any conspiracy of primitive theologians should have begotten such a plethora of gods. It must have been a boon to have so many deities, so many fascinating legends, sacred shrines, and solemn or joyous festivals. Polytheism is as natural as polygamy, and survives as long, suiting well all the contradictory currents of the world. Even today, in Mediterranean Christianity, it is not God who is worshiped, so much as the saints; it is polytheism that sheds over the simple life the inspiring poetry of consolatory myth, and gives to the humble soul the aid and comfort that it would not venture to expect from a Supreme Being unapproachably awful and remote.

Each of the gods had a mythos, or story, attached to him, which accounted for his place in the city's life, or for the ritual that honored him. These myths, rising spontaneously out of the lore of the place and the people, or out of the inventions and embellishments of rhapsodists, became at once the faith and the philosophy, the literature and the history of the early Greek; from them came the subjects that adorned Greek vases, and suggested to artists countless paintings, statues, and reliefs. Despite the achievements of philosophy and the attempts of a few to preach a monotheistic creed, the people continued to the end of Hellenic civilization to create myths, and even gods. Men like Heracleitus might allegorize the myths, or like Plato adapt them, or like Xenophanes denounce them; but when Pausanias toured Greece five centuries after Plato he found still alive among the people the legends that had warmed the heart of the Homeric age. The mythopoetic, theopoetic process is natural, and goes on today as

always; there is a birth rate as well as a death rate of the gods; deity is like energy, and its quantity remains, through all vicissitudes of form, approximately unchanged from generation to generation.

II. AN INVENTORY OF THE GODS

1. *The Lesser Deities*

We shall force some order and clarity upon this swarm of gods if we artificially divide them into seven groups: sky-gods, earth-gods, fertility-gods, animal gods, subterranean gods, ancestor or hero gods, and Olympians. "The names of all of them," as Hesiod said, "it were troublesome for a mortal man to tell."¹

(1) Originally, so far as we can make out, the great god of the invading Greeks, as of the Vedic Hindus, was the noble and various sky itself; it was probably this sky-god who with progressing anthropomorphism became Uranus, or Heaven, and then the "cloud-compelling," rain-making, thunder-herding Zeus.² In a land surfeited with sunshine and hungry for rain, the sun, Helios, was only a minor deity. Agamemnon prayed to him,³ and the Spartans sacrificed horses to him to draw his flaming chariot through the skies;* the Rhodians, in Hellenistic days, honored Helios as their chief divinity, flung annually into the sea four horses and a chariot for his use, and dedicated to him the famous Colossus;⁴ and Anaxagoras almost lost his life, even in Periclean Athens, for saying that the sun was not a god, but only a ball of fire. Generally, however, there was little worship of the sun in classic Greece; still less of the moon (Selene); least of all, of the planets or the stars.

(2) The earth, not the heavens, was the home of most Greek gods. And first the earth itself was the goddess Ge or Gaea, patient and bountiful mother, pregnant through the embrace of raining Uranus, the sky. A thousand lesser deities dwelt on the earth, in its waters, or in its surrounding air: spirits of sacred trees, especially the oak; Nereids, Naiads, Oceanids, in rivers, lakes, or the sea; gods gushing forth as wells or springs, or flowing as stately streams like the Maeander or the Spercheus; gods of the wind, like Boreas, Zephyr, Notus, and Eurus, with their master Aeolus; or the great god Pan, the horned, cloven-footed, sensual, smiling Nourisher, god of shepherds and flocks, of woods and the wild life lurking in them, he whose magic flute could be heard in every brook and dell, whose startling cry brought *panic* to any careless herd, and whose attendants were

* Phaëthon (the Brilliant), son of Helios, begged for the thrill of driving the sun's chariot across the heavens. He drove it recklessly, nearly set the world on fire, was struck by lightning, and fell into the sea. Perhaps the Greeks meant this tale, like that of Icarus, to serve as a sermon to youth.

merry fauns and satyrs, and those old satyrs called *sileni*, half goat and half Socrates. Everywhere in nature there were gods; the air was so crowded with spirits of good or evil that, said an unknown poet, "There is not one empty chink into which you could push the spike of a blade of corn."⁸

(3) The most mysterious and potent force in nature being reproduction, it was natural that the Greeks, like other ancient peoples, should worship the principle and emblems of fertility in man and woman along with their worship of fertility in the soil. The phallus, as symbol of reproduction, appears in the rites of Demeter, Dionysus, Hermes, even of the chaste Artemis.⁶ In classical sculpture and painting this emblem recurs with scandalous frequency. Even the Great Dionysia, the religious festival at which the Greek drama was played, was introduced by phallic processions, to which Athenian colonies piously sent phalli.⁷ Doubtless such festivals lent themselves to much lusty humor, as one may judge from Aristophanes; but all in all the humor was healthy, and perhaps served the purpose of stimulating Eros and promoting the birth rate.⁸

The more vulgar side of this fertility cult was expressed in the Hellenistic and Roman periods by the worship of Priapus, born of an amour between Dionysus and Aphrodite, and popular with vase painters and the mural artists of Pompeii. A lovelier variation of the reproductive theme was the veneration of goddesses representing motherhood. Arcadia, Argos, Eleusis, Athens, Ephesus, and other localities gave their greatest devotion to feminine deities, often husbandless; such goddesses presumably reflect a primitive matrilinear age before the coming of marriage;⁹ the enthronement of Zeus as Father God over all gods represents the victory of the patriarchal principle.* The probable priority of women in agriculture may have helped to give form to the greatest of these mother deities, Demeter, goddess of the corn or the tilled earth. One of the most beautiful of Greek myths, skillfully narrated in the *Hymn to Demeter* once attributed to Homer, tells how Demeter's daughter Persephone, while gathering flowers, was kidnaped by Pluto, god of the underworld, and snatched down to Hades. The sorrowing mother searched for her everywhere, found her, and persuaded Pluto to let Persephone live on the earth nine months in every year—a pretty symbol for the annual death and rebirth of the soil. Because the people of Eleusis befriended the disguised Demeter as she "sat by the way, grieved in her inmost heart," she taught them and Attica the secret of agriculture, and sent Triptolemus, son of Eleusis' king, to spread the art among mankind. Essentially it was the same myth as that of Isis and Osiris in Egypt, Tammuz and Ishtar in Babylonia, Astarte and Adonis in Syria, Cybele and Attis in Phrygia. The cult of motherhood survived through classical times to take new life in the worship of Mary the Mother of God.

* Note the absence of mother goddesses in such strongly patriarchal societies as Judea, Islam, and Protestant Christendom.

(4) Certain animals, in early Greece, were honored as semideities. Greek religion was too anthropomorphic, in its sculptural age, to admit the divine menageries that we find in Egypt and India; but a vestige of a less classical past appears in the frequent association of an animal with a god. The bull was sacred because of its strength and potency; it was often an associate, disguise, or symbol of Zeus and Dionysus, and perhaps preceded them as a god.²⁰ In like manner the "cow-eyed Hera" may once have been a sacred cow.²¹ The pig too was holy because of its fertility; it was associated with the gentle Demeter; at one of her festivals, the Thesmophoria, the sacrifice was ostensibly *of* a pig, possibly *to* it.²² At the feast of the Diasia the sacrifice was nominally to Zeus, really to a subterranean snake that was now dignified with his name.²³ Whether the snake was holy as supposedly deathless, or as a symbol of reproductive power, we find it passing down as a deity from the snake-goddess of Crete into fifth-century Athens; in the temple of Athena, on the Acropolis, a sacred serpent dwelt to whom, each month, a honey cake was offered in appeasing sacrifice. In Greek art a snake is often seen about the figures of Hermes, Apollo, and Asclepius;²⁴ under the shield of Pheidias' *Athene Parthenos* was wreathed a mighty serpent; the *Farnese Athena* is half covered with snakes.²⁵ The snake was often used as a symbol or form of the guardian deity of temple or home;²⁷ perhaps because it prowled about tombs it was believed to be the soul of the dead.²⁸ The Pythian games are thought to have been celebrated, at first, in honor of the dead python of Delphi.

(5) The most terrible of the gods were under the earth. In caves and clefts and like nether chambers dwelt those chthonian or earthly deities whom the Greeks worshiped not by day with loving adoration, but at night with apotropaic rites of riddance and fear. These vague nonhuman powers were the real *autochthonoi* of Greece, older than the Hellenes, older perhaps than the Mycenaean, who probably transmitted them to Greece; if we could trace them to their origin we might find that they were the vengeful spirits of the animals that had been driven into the forests or under the soil by the advance and multiplication of men. The greatest of these subterranean deities was called Zeus Chthonios; but *Zeus* here meant merely *god*.²⁹ Or he was called Zeus Meilichios, the Benevolent God; but here again the words were deceptive and propitiatory, for this god was a fearful snake.—Brother to Zeus was Hades, lord of the underworld that took his name. To placate him the Greeks called him Pluto, the giver of abundance, for he had it in his power to bless or blight the roots of all things that grew in the soil.* Still more ghostly and terrible was Hecate, an evil spirit that came up from the lower world and brought misfortune, through her evil

* Plutus, god of wealth, was a form of Pluto. In early Greece wealth took chiefly the form of corn either growing in the earth or stored in the earth in jars, in either case under Pluto's protection.³⁰

eye, to all whom she visited. The less learned Greeks sacrificed puppies to keep her away.²¹

(6) Before the classical age the dead were regarded as spirits capable of good and evil to men, and were appeased with offerings and prayer. They were not quite gods, but the primitive Greek family, like the Chinese, honored its dead beyond any deity.²² In classical Greece these vague ghosts were more dreaded than loved, and were propitiated with aversion rituals, as in the festival of Anthesteria. The worship of heroes was an extension of the cult of the dead. Great, noble, or beautiful men or women could be raised by the gods to immortal life and become minor deities. So the people of Olympia offered annual sacrifice to Hippodameia; Cassandra was worshiped at Laconian Leuctra, Helen at Sparta, Oedipus at Colonus. Or a god might descend into the body of a mortal, and transform him with divinity; or the god might cohabit with a mortal and beget a hero-god, as Zeus with Alcmena begot Heracles. Many cities, groups, even professions, traced their origin to some god-born hero; so the physicians of Greece looked back to Asclepius. The god was once a dead man, ancestor, or hero; the temple was originally a tomb; the church is still in most lands a shelter for relics of the sacred dead. In general the Greeks made less distinction between men and gods than we do; many of their gods were as human, except in birth, as our saints, and as close to their worshipers; and though they were called Immortals, some of them, like Dionysus, could die.

2. *The Olympians*

All these were the less famous, though not necessarily the less honored, gods of Greece. How is it that we hear so little of them in Homer, and so much of the Olympians? Probably because the gods of Olympus entered with the Achaeans and Dorians, overlaid the Mycenaean and chthonian deities, and conquered them as their worshipers were conquered. We see the change in action at Dodona and Delphi, where the older god of the earth, Gaea, was displaced in the one case by Zeus, in the other by Apollo. The defeated gods were not wiped out; they remained, so to speak, as subject deities, hiding bitterly underground, but still revered by the common people, while the victorious Olympians received on their mountaintop the worship of the aristocracy; hence Homer, who composed for the elite, says almost nothing of the nether gods. Homer, Hesiod, and the sculptors helped the political ascendancy of the conquerors to spread the cult of the Olympians. Sometimes the minor gods were combined or absorbed into the greater figures, or became their attendants or satellites, very much as minor states were now and then attached or subjected to greater ones; so the satyrs

and sileni were given to Dionysus, the sea nymphs to Poseidon, the mountain and forest sprites to Artemis. The more savage rites and myths faded out; the chaos of a demon-haunted earth yielded to a semiorderly divine government that reflected the growing political stability of the Greek world.

At the head of this new regime was the majestic and patriarchal Zeus. He was not first in time; Uranus and Cronus, as we have seen, preceded him; but they and the Titans, like Lucifer's hosts, were overthrown.* Zeus and his brothers cast lots to divide the world amongst them; Zeus won the sky, Poseidon the sea, Hades the bowels of the earth. There is no creation in this mythology: the world existed before the gods, and the gods do not make man out of the slime but beget him by union among themselves, or with their mortal offspring; God is literally the Father in the theology of the Greeks. Nor are the Olympians omnipotent or omniscient; each limits the other, or even opposes the other; any one of them, especially Zeus, can be deceived. Nevertheless they acknowledge his suzerainty, and crowd his court like the retainers of a feudal lord; and though he consults them on occasion, and now and then yields his preference to theirs,²³ he frequently puts them in their place.²⁴ He begins as a sky-and-mountain-god, provider of the indispensable rain.† Like Yahweh he is, among his earlier forms, a god of war; he debates with himself whether to end the siege of Troy or "make the war more bloody," and decides for the latter course.²⁵ Gradually he becomes the calm and mighty ruler of gods and men, bestriding Olympus in bearded dignity. He is the head and source of the moral order of the world; he punishes filial neglect, guards family property, sanctions oaths, pursues perjurers, and protects boundaries, hearths, suppliants, and guests. At last he is the serene dispenser of judgment whom Pheidias carves for Olympia.

His one failing is the youthful readiness with which he falls in love. Not having created women, he admires them as wonderful beings, bearing even to the gods the inestimable gifts of beauty and tenderness; and he finds it beyond him to resist them. Hesiod draws up a long list of the divine amours and their glorious offspring.²⁷ His first mate is Dione, but he leaves her in

* This struggle between Zeus and his aides against the Titans became for the Greeks a symbol of the conquest of barbarism and brute strength by civilization and reason, and offered a frequent subject for art.

† The name *Zeus* is probably akin to the Latin *dies*, our day, and may come from an Indo-European root *di*, meaning to shine. Jupiter is *Zeus-pater*, Zeus the father; hence the genitive *Dios*. Today the haunts and peaks once sacred to Zeus are named, or dedicated to, St. Elias, the rain-giving saint of the Greek Church.²⁶

Epirus when he moves to Thessalian Olympus. There his first wife is Metis, goddess of measure, mind, wisdom. Gossip says that her children will dethrone him; therefore he swallows her, absorbs her qualities, and becomes himself the god of wisdom. Metis is delivered of Athena within him, and his head has to be cut open that Athena may be born. Lonely for loveliness, he takes Themis for his mate, and begets by her the twelve Hours; then he takes Eurynome, and begets the three Graces; then Mnemosyne, and engenders the nine Muses; then Leto, and fathers Apollo and Artemis; then his sister Demeter, and has Persephone; finally, having sown his wild oats, he weds his sister Hera, makes her Queen of Olympus, and receives from her Hebe, Ares, Hephaestus, and Eileithyia. But he does not get along well with Hera. She is as old a god as he, and more honored in many states; she is the patron deity of matrimony and motherhood, protectress of the marriage tie; she is prim and grave and virtuous, and frowns upon his escapades; moreover, she is an excellent shrew. He thinks of beating her,²⁸ but finds it easier to console himself with new amours. His first mortal mate is Niobe; his last is Alcmena, who is descended from Niobe in the sixteenth generation.* He loves also, with Greek impartiality, the handsome Ganymede, and snatches him up to be his cupbearer on Olympus.

It was natural that so fertile a father should have some distinguished children. When Athena was born in full development and armament from the head of Zeus she provided the literature of the world with one of its most hackneyed similes. She was an appropriate goddess for Athens, consoling its maids with her proud virginity, inspiring its men with martial ardor, and symbolizing for Pericles the wisdom that belonged to her as the daughter of Metis and Zeus. When Pallas the Titan tried to make love to her she slew him, and added his name to hers as a warning to other suitors. To her Athens dedicated its loveliest temple and its most splendid festival.

More widely worshiped than Athena was her comely brother Apollo, bright deity of the sun, patron of music, poetry, and art, founder of cities, maker of laws, god of healing and father of Asclepius, "far-darting" archer and god of war, successor to Gaea and Phoebé† at Delphi as the holiest oracle of Greece. As god of the growing crops he received tithe offerings at harvest time, and in return he radiated his golden warmth and light from Delos and Delphi to enrich the soil. Everywhere he was associated with order, measure, and beauty; and whereas in other cults there were strange

* It should be added, in justice to the dead, that these adventures were probably invented by the poets, or by tribes anxious to trace their lineage to the greatest of the gods.

† From Phoebé he took the name Phoebus, "inspired."

elements of fear and superstition, in the worship of Apollo, and in his great festivals at Delphi and Delos, the dominant note was the rejoicing of a brilliant people in a god of health and wisdom, reason and song.

Happy, too, was his sister Artemis (Diana), maiden goddess of the chase, so absorbed in the ways of animals and the pleasures of the woods that she had no time for the love of men. She was the goddess of wild nature, of meadows, forests, hills, and the sacred bough. As Apollo was the ideal of Greek youth, so Artemis was the model of Greek girlhood—strong, athletic, graceful, chaste; and yet again she was the patroness of women in childbirth, who prayed to her to ease their pains. At Ephesus she kept her Asiatic character as a goddess of motherhood and fertility. In this way the ideas of virgin and mother became confused in her worship; and the Christian Church found it wise, in the fifth century of our era, to attach the remnants of this cult to Mary, and to transform the mid-August harvest festival of Artemis into the feast of the Assumption.²⁹ In such ways the old is preserved in the new, and everything changes except the essence. History, like life, must be continuous or die; character and institutions may be altered, but slowly; a serious interruption of their development throws them into national amnesia and insanity.

A thoroughly human figure in this pantheon was the master craftsman of Olympus, that lame Hephaestus whom the Romans knew as Vulcan. At first he seems a pitiful and ridiculous figure, this insulted and injured Quasimodo of the skies; but in the end our sympathies are with him rather than with the clever and unscrupulous gods who maltreat him. Perhaps in early days, before he became so human, he had been the leaping spirit of the fire and the forge. In the Homeric theogony he is the son of Zeus and Hera; but other myths assure us that Hera, jealous of Zeus's unaided delivery of Athena, gave birth to Hephaestus without the aid of any male. Seeing him to be ugly and weak, she cast him down from Olympus. He found his way back, and built for the gods the many mansions in which they dwelt. Though his mother had dealt so cruelly with him, he showed her all kindness and respect, and defended her so zealously in one of her quarrels with Zeus that the great Olympian seized him by the leg and hurled him down to the earth. A whole day Hephaestus fell; at last he landed on the island of Lemnos, and hurt his ankle; certainly thereafter (before that, says Homer) he was painfully lame. Again he found his way back to Olympus. In his resounding workshops he built a mighty anvil with twenty huge bellows, made the shield and armor of Achilles, statues that moved of their own accord, and other very wonderful things. The Greeks worshiped him as

the god of all metal trades, then of all handicrafts, and pictured the volcanoes as the chimneys of his subterranean forges. It was his misfortune that he married Aphrodite, for it is difficult for beauty to be virtuous. Learning of her affair with Ares, Hephaestus fashioned a trap that fell upon the lovers as they loved; and then the limping deity had his lame revenge by bringing his fellow gods to look in laughter upon the bound divinities of love and war. But to Hermes, Homer tells us, Apollo said:

“Hermes, son of Zeus . . . wouldst thou in sooth be willing, even though ensnared with strong bonds, to lie on a couch by the side of golden Aphrodite?” Then the messenger answered him: “Would that this might befall, Lord Apollo, that thrice as many bonds inextricable might clasp me about, and that ye gods—aye, and all the goddesses, too—might be looking on, but that I might sleep by the side of golden Aphrodite.”⁸⁰

Ares (Mars) was never distinguished for intelligence or subtlety; his business was war, and even the charms of Aphrodite could not give him the thrill that came to him from lusty and natural killing. Homer calls him “the curse of men,” and tells with pleasure how Athena laid him low with a stone; “he covered, as he lay, seven acres of the field.”⁸¹ Hermes (Mercury) is more interesting. In origin he is a stone, and from the cult of sacred stones his worship is derived; the stages of his evolution are still visible. Then he is the tall stone placed upon graves, or he is the daimon, or spirit, in this stone. Then he is the boundary stone or its god, marking and guarding a field; and because his function there is also to promote fertility, the phallus becomes one of his symbols. Then he is the herm or pillar—with carved head, uncarved body, and prominent male member—which was placed before all respectable houses in Athens;⁸² we shall see how the mutilation of these hermae on the eve of the expedition against Syracuse provided the proximate cause for the ruin of Alcibiades and Athens. Again he is the god of wayfarers and the protector of heralds; their characteristic staff, or caduceus, is one of his favorite insignia. As god of travelers he becomes a god of luck, trade, cunning, and gain, therefore an inventor and guarantor of measures and scales, a patron saint of perjurers, embezzlers, and thieves.⁸³ He is himself a herald, bearing the billets and decrees of Olympus from god to god or man, and he moves on winged sandals with the speed of an angry wind. His running-about gives him a lithe and graceful form, and prepares him for Praxiteles. As a swift and vigorous youth he is the patron saint of athletes, and his shamelessly virile image has a place in every palaestra.⁸⁴ As

herald he is the god of eloquence; as celestial interpreter he is the first of a long *hermeneutical* line. One of the "Homeric" Hymns tells how, in his youth, he stretched strings across a tortoise shell, and so invented the lyre. Finally it comes his turn to appease Aphrodite; and their offspring, we are told,⁸⁵ is a delicate hermaphrodite, sharing their charms and named from their names.

It was characteristic of Greece that in addition to deities of chastity, virginity, and motherhood it should have a goddess of beauty and love. Doubtless in her Near-Eastern origins, and in Cyprus her half-Oriental home, Aphrodite was first of all a mother goddess; to the end of her tenure she remained associated with reproduction and fertility in the whole realm of plant, animal, and human life. But as civilization developed, and increasing security obviated the need for a high birth rate, the esthetic sense was left free to see other values in woman than those of multiplication, and to make Aphrodite not only the embodiment of the ideal of beauty, but the deity of all heterosexual pleasure. The Greeks worshiped her in many forms: as Aphrodite Urania, the Heavenly, the goddess of chaste or sacred love; as Aphrodite Pandemos, the Popular, the goddess of profane love in all its modes; and even as Aphrodite Kallipygos, the Venus of the Lovely Nates.⁸⁶ At Athens and Corinth the courtesans built temples to her as their patron saint. At the beginning of April various cities in Greece celebrated her great festival, the Aphrodisia; and on that occasion, for those who cared to take part, sexual freedom was the order of the day.⁸⁷ She was the love goddess of the sensual and passionate south, ancient rival of Artemis, the love goddess of the cold and hunting north. Mythology, almost as ironic as history, made her the wife of the crippled Hephaestus, but she consoled herself with Ares, Hermes, Poseidon, Dionysus, and many a mortal like Anchises and Adonis.* To her, in competition with Hera and Athena, Paris awarded the golden apple as the prize of beauty. But perhaps she was never really beautiful until Praxiteles reconceived her, and gave her the loveliness for which Greece could forgive all her sins.

* The myth of Adonis is one more variation on the vegetation theme—the annual death and resurrection of the soil. This handsome youth was desired by both Aphrodite and Persephone, the goddesses of love and of death. Ares, jealous of Adonis' success with Aphrodite, disguised himself as a wild boar and killed him. The anemone was born of Adonis' blood, and rivers of poetry from Aphrodite's grief. Zeus persuaded the goddesses to divide Adonis' time and attentions by leaving him for half a year with Persephone in Hades, and restoring him for half a year to earthly life and love. In Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Athens the death of the boy was commemorated in the festival of the Adonia; women carried images of the Lord (for such was the meaning of his name), loudly bewailed his death, and triumphantly celebrated his resurrection.⁸⁸

To the legitimate or illegitimate children of Zeus we must add, as major Olympians, his sister Hestia, goddess of the hearth, and his unruly brother Poseidon. This Greek Neptune, secure in his watery realms, considered himself fully the equal of Zeus. Even landlocked nations worshiped him, for he commanded not only the sea but the rivers and the springs; it was he who guided the mysterious subterranean streams, and made earthquakes with tidal waves.⁸⁹ To him Greek mariners prayed, and raised appeasing temples on perilous promontories.

Subordinate deities were numerous even on Olympus, for there was no end to personifications. There was Hestia (the Roman Vesta), goddess of the hearth and its sacred fire. There was Iris, the rainbow, sometimes messenger for Zeus; Hebe, goddess of youth; Eileithyia, who helped women in childbirth; Dike or Justice; Tyche, Chance; and Eros, Love, whom Hesiod made the creator of the world, whom Sappho called "a limb-dissolving, bitter-sweet, impracticable wild beast."⁹⁰ There was Hymeneus, the Marriage Song; Hypnos, Sleep; Oneiros, Dream; Geras, Old Age; Lethe, Oblivion; Thanatos, Death, and others beyond naming. There were nine Muses to inspire artists and poets: Clio for history, Euterpe for lyric poetry accompanied by the flute, Thalia for comic drama and idyllic poetry, Melpomene for tragedy, Terpsichore for choral dance and song, Erato for love verse and mimicry; Polymnia for hymns, Urania for astronomy, Calliope for epic poetry. There were three Graces, and their twelve attendants, the Hours. There was Nemesis, who meted out good and evil to men, and visited with disaster all who were guilty of *hybris*—insolence in prosperity. There were the terrible Erinnyes, the Furies who left no wrong unrevenged; the Greeks with deprecating euphemism called them Well-Wishers, Eumenides. And finally there were the Moirai, the Fates or Allotters who regulated inevitably the affairs of life, and ruled, some said, both gods and men. In that conception Greek religion found its limit, and flowed over into science and law.

We have left for the last the most troublesome, the most popular, the most difficult to classify, of all the Greek gods. Only late in his career was Dionysus received into Olympus. In Thrace, which gave him as a Greek gift to Greece, he was the god of liquor brewed from barley, and was known as Sabazius; in Greece he became a god of wine, the nourisher and guardian of the vine; he began as a goddess of fertility, became a god of intoxication, and ended as a son of god dying to save mankind. Many figures and legends were mingled to make his myth. The Greeks thought of him as

Zagreus, "the horned child" borne to Zeus by his daughter Persephone. He was the best beloved of his father, and was seated beside him on the throne of heaven. When the jealous Hera incited the Titans to kill him, Zeus, to disguise him, changed him into a goat, then a bull; in this form, nevertheless, the Titans captured him, cut his body into pieces, and boiled them in a caldron. Athena, like another Trelawney, saved the heart, and carried it to Zeus; Zeus gave it to Semele, who, impregnated with it, gave to the god a second birth under the name of Dionysus.*

Mourning for Dionysus' death, and joyful celebration of his resurrection, formed the basis of a ritual extremely widespread among the Greeks. In springtime, when the vine was bursting into blossom, Greek women went up into the hills to meet the reborn god. For two days they drank without restraint, and like our less religious bacchanalians, considered him witless who would not lose his wits. They marched in wild procession, led by Maenads, or mad women, devoted to Dionysus; they listened tensely to the story they knew so well, of the suffering, death, and resurrection of their god; and as they drank and danced they fell into a frenzy in which all bonds were loosed. The height and center of their ceremony was to seize upon a goat, a bull, sometimes a man (seeing in them incarnations of the god); to tear the live victim to pieces in commemoration of Dionysus' dismemberment; then to drink the blood and eat the flesh in a sacred communion whereby, as they thought, the god would enter them and possess their souls. In that divine enthusiasm† they were convinced that they and the god became one in a mystic and triumphant union; they took his name, called themselves, after one of his titles, *Bacchoi*, and knew that now they would never die. Or they termed their state an *ecstasis*, a going out of their souls to meet and be one with Dionysus; thus they felt freed from the burden of the flesh, they acquired divine insight, they were able to prophesy, they were gods. Such was the passionate cult that came down from Thrace into Greece like a medieval epidemic of religion, dragging one region after another from the cold and clear Olympians of the state worship into a faith and ritual that satisfied the craving for excitement and release, the longing for enthusiasm and possession, mysticism and mystery. The priests of

* Diodorus Siculus, as early as 50 B.C., interpreted the tale as a vegetation myth. Zagreus, the vine, is a child of Demeter, the earth, fertilized by Zeus, the rain. The vine, like the god, is cut (pruned) to give it new life; and the juice of the grape is boiled to make wine. Each year, under nourishing rains, the vine is reborn.⁴¹ Herodotus found so many resemblances between the myths of Dionysus and Osiris that he identified the two gods in one of the first essays in comparative religion.⁴²

† From *entheos*, "a god within"; "enthusiasm" originally meant possession by a god.

Delphi and the rulers of Athens tried to keep the cult at a distance, but failed; all they could do was to adopt Dionysus into Olympus, Hellenize and humanize him, give him an official festival, and turn the revelry of his worshipers from the mad ecstasy of wine among the hills into the stately processions, the robust songs, and the noble drama of the Great Dionysia. For a while they won Dionysus over to Apollo, but in the end Apollo yielded to Dionysus' heir and conqueror, Christ.

III. MYSTERIES

There were essentially three elements and stages in Greek religion: chthonian, Olympian, and mystic. The first was probably of Pelasgo-Mycenaean origin, the second probably Achaeo-Dorian, the third Egypto-Asiatic. The first worshiped subterranean, the second celestial, the third resurrected, gods. The first was most popular among the poor, the second among the well to do, the third in the lower middle class. The first predominated before the Homeric age, the second in it, the third after it. By the time of the Periclean Enlightenment the most vigorous element in Greek religion was the mystery. In the Greek sense a mystery was a secret ceremony in which sacred symbols were revealed, symbolic rites were performed, and only initiates were the worshipers. Usually the rites represented or commemorated, in semidramatic form, the suffering, death, and resurrection of a god, pointed back to old vegetation themes and magic, and promised the initiate a personal immortality.

Many places in Greece celebrated such mystic rites, but no other place in this respect could rival Eleusis. The mysteries there were of pre-Achaean origin, and appear to have been originally an autumn festival of plowing and sowing.⁴⁸ A myth explained how Demeter, rewarding the people of Attica for their kindness to her in her wanderings, established at Eleusis her greatest temple, which was destroyed and rebuilt many times during the history of Greece. Under Solon, Peisistratus, and Pericles the festival of Demeter at Eleusis was adopted by Athens, and raised to higher elaboration and pomp. In the Lesser Mysteries, held near Athens in the spring, candidates for initiation underwent a preliminary purification by self-immersion in the waters of the Ilissus. In September the candidates and others walked in grave but happy pilgrimage for fourteen miles along the Sacred Way to Eleusis, bearing at their head the image of the chthonian deity Iacchus. The procession arrived at Eleusis under torchlight, and solemnly placed the image in the temple; after which the day was ended with sacred dances and songs.

The Greater Mysteries lasted four days more. Those who had been purified with bathing and fasting were now admitted to the lesser rites; those who had

received such rites a year before were taken into the Hall of Initiation, where the secret ceremony was performed. The *mystai*, or initiates, broke their fast by participating in a holy communion in memory of Demeter, drinking a holy mixture of meal and water, and eating sacred cakes. What mystic ritual was then performed we do not know; the secret was well kept throughout antiquity, under penalty of death; even the pious Aeschylus narrowly escaped condemnation for certain lines that might have given the secret away. The ceremony was in any case a symbolic play, and had a part in generating the Dionysian drama. Very probably the theme was the rape of Persephone by Pluto, the sorrowful wandering of Demeter, the return of the Maiden to earth, and the revelation of agriculture to Attica. The summary of the ceremony was the mystic marriage of a priest representing Zeus with a priestess impersonating Demeter. These symbolic nuptials bore fruit with magic speed, for it was soon followed, we are told, by a solemn announcement that "Our Lady has borne a holy boy"; and a reaped ear of corn was exhibited as symbolizing the fruit of Demeter's labor—the bounty of the fields. The worshipers were then led by dim torchlight into dark subterranean caverns symbolizing Hades, and, again, to an upper chamber brilliant with light, representing, it appears, the abode of the blessed; and they were now shown, in solemn exaltation, the holy objects, relics, or icons that till that moment had been concealed. In this ecstasy of revelation, we are assured, they felt the unity of God, and the oneness of God and the soul; they were lifted up out of the delusion of individuality, and knew the peace of absorption into deity.⁴⁴

In the age of Peisistratus the mysteries of Dionysus entered into the Eleusinian liturgy by a religious infection: the god Iacchus was identified with Dionysus as the son of Persephone, and the legend of Dionysus Zagreus was superimposed upon the myth of Demeter.⁴⁵ But through all forms the basic idea of the mysteries remained the same: as the seed is born again, so may the dead have renewed life; and not merely the dreary, shadowy existence of Hades, but a life of happiness and peace. When almost everything else in Greek religion had passed away, this consoling hope, reunited in Alexandria with that Egyptian belief in immortality from which the Greek had been derived, gave to Christianity the weapon with which to conquer the Western world.

In the seventh century there came into Hellas, from Egypt, Thrace, and Thessaly, another mystic cult, even more important in Greek history than the mysteries of Eleusis. At its source we find, in the age of the Argonauts, the obscure but fascinating figure of Orpheus, a Thracian who "in culture, music, and poetry," says Diodorus, "far surpassed all men of whom we have a record."⁴⁶ Very probably he existed, though all that we now know of him bears the marks of myth. He is pictured as a gentle spirit, tender, medi-

tative, affectionate; sometimes a musician, sometimes a reforming ascetic priest of Dionysus. He played the lyre so well, and sang to it so melodiously, that those who heard him almost began to worship him as a god; wild animals became tame at his voice, and trees and rocks left their places to follow the sound of his harp. He married the fair Eurydice, and almost went mad when death took her. He plunged into Hades, charmed Persephone with his lyre, and was allowed to lead Eurydice up to life again on condition that he should not look back upon her until the surface of the earth was reached. At the last barrier anxiety overcame him lest she should no longer be following; he looked back, only to see her snatched down once more into the nether world. Thracian women, resenting his unwillingness to console himself with them, tore him to pieces in one of their Dionysian revels; Zeus atoned for them by placing the lyre of Orpheus as a constellation among the stars. The severed head, still singing, was buried at Lesbos in a cleft that became the site of a popular oracle; there, we are told, the nightingales sang with especial tenderness.⁴⁷

In later days it was claimed that he had left behind him many sacred songs; and perhaps it was so. At the behest of Hipparchus, says Greek tradition, a scholar named Onomacritus, about 520, edited these as the Homeric lays had been edited a generation before. In the sixth century, or earlier, these hymns had acquired a sacred character as divinely inspired, and formed the basis of a mystical cult related to that of Dionysus but far superior to it in doctrine, ritual, and moral influence. The creed was essentially an affirmation of the passion (suffering), death, and resurrection of the divine son Dionysus Zagreus, and the resurrection of all men into a future of reward and punishment. Since the Titans, who had slain Dionysus, were believed to have been the ancestors of man, a taint of original sin rested upon all humanity; and in punishment for this the soul was enclosed in the body as in a prison or a tomb. But man might console himself by knowing that the Titans had eaten Dionysus, and that therefore every man harbored, in his soul, a particle of indestructible divinity. In a mystic sacrament of communion the Orphic worshipers ate the raw flesh of a bull as a symbol of Dionysus to commemorate the slaying and eating of the god, and to absorb the divine essence anew.⁴⁸

After death, said Orphic theology, the soul goes down to Hades, and must face judgment by the gods of the underworld; the Orphic hymns and ritual, like the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, instructed the faithful in the art of preparing for this comprehensive and final examination. If the verdict was guilty there would be severe punishment. One form of the doctrine

conceived this punishment as eternal,⁴⁹ and transmitted to later theology the notion of hell. Another form adopted the idea of transmigration: the soul was reborn again and again into lives happier or bitterer than before according to the purity or impurity of its former existence; and this wheel of rebirth would turn until complete purity was achieved, and the soul was admitted to the Islands of the Blest.⁵⁰ Another variant offered hope that the punishment in Hades might be ended through penances performed in advance by the individual, or, after his death, by his friends. In this way a doctrine of purgatory and indulgences arose; and Plato describes with almost the anger of a Luther the peddling of such indulgences in the Athens of the fourth century B.C.:

Mendicant prophets go to rich men's doors and persuade them that they have a power committed to them of making atonement for their sins or those of their fathers by sacrifices or charms. . . . And they produce a host of books written by Musaeus and Orpheus . . . according to which they perform their ritual, and persuade not only individuals but whole cities that expiations and atonements may be made by sacrifices and amusements [ceremonies?] which fill a vacant hour, and are equally at the service of the living and the dead. The latter [ceremonies] they call mysteries, and these redeem us from the Pains of Hell; but if we neglect them no one knows what awaits us.⁵¹

Nevertheless there were in Orphism idealistic trends that culminated in the morals and monasticism of Christianity. The reckless looseness of the Olympians was replaced by a strict code of conduct, and the mighty Zeus was slowly dethroned by the gentle figure of Orpheus, even as Yahweh was to be dethroned by Christ. A conception of sin and conscience, a dualistic view of the body as evil and of the soul as divine, entered into Greek thought; the subjugation of the flesh became a main purpose of religion, as a condition of the release for the soul. The brotherhood of Orphic initiates had no ecclesiastical organization and no separate life; but they were distinguished by the wearing of white garments, the avoidance of flesh food, and a degree of asceticism not usually associated with Hellenic ways. They represented, in several aspects, a Puritan Reformation in the history of Greece. Their rites encroached more and more upon the public worship of the Olympian gods.

The influence of the sect was extensive and enduring. Perhaps it was here that the Pythagoreans took their diet, their dress, and their theory of

transmigration; it is worthy of note that the oldest Orphic documents now extant were found in southern Italy.⁶³ Plato, though he rejected much in Orphism, accepted its opposition of body and soul, its puritan tendency, its hope of immortality. Part of the pantheism and asceticism of Stoicism may be traced to an Orphic origin. The Neo-Platonists of Alexandria possessed a large collection of Orphic writings, and based upon them much of their theology and their mysticism. The doctrines of hell, purgatory, and heaven, of the body versus the soul, of the divine son slain and reborn, as well as the sacramental eating of the body and blood and divinity of the god, directly or deviously influenced Christianity, which was itself a mystery religion of atonement and hope, of mystic union and release. The basic ideas and ritual of the Orphic cult are alive and flourishing amongst us today.

IV. WORSHIP

Greek ritual was as varied as the kinds of deities that it honored. The chthonian gods received a gloomy ritual of appeasement and riddance, the Olympians a joyful ritual of welcome and praise. Neither form of ceremony required a clergyman: the father acted as priest for the family, the chief magistrate for the state. Life in Greece was not as secular as it has been described; religion played a major part in it everywhere, and each government protected the official cult as vital to social order and political stability. But whereas in Egypt and the Near East the priesthood dominated the state, in Greece the state dominated the priesthood, took the leadership of religion, and reduced the clergy to minor functionaries in the temples. The property of the temples, in real estate, money, and slaves, was audited and administered by officials of the state.⁶⁴ There were no seminaries for the training of priests; anyone could be quietly chosen or appointed priest if he knew the rites of the god; and in many places the office was let out to the highest bidder.⁶⁵ There was no hierarchy of priestly caste; the priests of one temple or state had usually no association with those of another.⁶⁶ There was no church, no orthodoxy, no rigid creed; religion consisted not in professing certain beliefs, but in joining in the official ritual;⁶⁷ any man might have his own creed provided that he did not openly deny or blaspheme the city's gods. In Greece church and state were one.

The place of worship could be the domestic hearth, the municipal hearth in the city hall, some cleft in the earth for a chthonian deity, some temple for an Olympian god. The precincts of the temple were sacred and

inviolable; here the worshipers met, and here all pursued persons, even if tainted with serious crime, could find sanctuary. The temple was not for the congregation but for the god; there, in his home, his statue was erected, and a light burned before it which was not allowed to die. Often the people identified the god with the statue; they washed, dressed, and tended the image carefully, and sometimes scolded it for negligence; they told how, at various times, the statue had sweated, or wept, or closed its eyes.⁷⁷ In the temple records a history was kept of the festivals of the god, and of the major events in the life of the city or group that worshiped him; this was the source and first form of Greek historiography.

The ceremony consisted of procession, chants, sacrifice, prayer, and sometimes a sacred meal. Magic and masquerade, tableaux and dramatic representations might be part of the procession. In most cases the basic ritual was prescribed by custom, and every movement of it, every word of the hymns and prayers, was preserved in a book kept sacred by the family or the state; rarely was any syllable or action altered, or any rhythm; the god might not like or comprehend the novelty. The living speech changed, the ritual speech remained as before; in time the worshipers ceased to understand the words they used,⁷⁸ but the thrill of antiquity supplied the place of understanding. Often the ceremony outlasted even the memory of the cause that had prompted it; then new myths were invented to explain its establishment: the myth or creed might change, but not the ritual. Music was essential to the whole process, for without music religion would be difficult; music generates religion as much as religion generates music. Out of the temple and processional chants came poetry, and the meters that later adorned the robust profanity of Archilochus, the reckless passion of Sappho, and the scandalous delicacies of Anacreon.

Having reached the altar—usually in front of the temple—the worshipers sought with sacrifice and prayer to avert the wrath or win the aid of their god. As individuals they might offer almost anything of value—statues, reliefs, furniture, weapons, caldrons, tripods, garments, pottery; when the gods could make no use of such articles the priests could. Armies might offer part of their spoils, as Xenophon's Ten Thousand did in their retreat.⁷⁹ Groups would offer the fruits of the field, the vines or the trees; more often an animal appetizing to the god; sometimes, on occasions of great need, a human being. Agamemnon offered Iphigenia for a wind; Achilles slaughtered twelve Trojan youths on the pyre of Patroclus;⁸⁰ human victims were hurled from the cliffs of Cyprus and Leucas to satiate Apollo; others were presented to Dionysus in Chios and Tenedos; Themistocles is said to have

sacrificed Persian captives to Dionysus at the battle of Salamis;⁸¹ the Spartans celebrated the festival of Artemis Orthia by flogging youths, sometimes to death, at her altar;⁸² in Arcadia Zeus received human sacrifice till the second century A.D.;⁸³ at Massalia, in time of pestilence, one of the poorer citizens was fed at public expense, clad in holy garments, decorated with sacred boughs, and cast over a cliff to death with prayers that he might bear punishment for all the sins of his people.⁸⁴ In Athens it was the custom, in famine, plague, or other crisis, to offer to the gods, in ritual mimicry or in actual fact, one or more scapegoats for the purification of the city; and a similar rite, mimic or literal, was annually performed at the festival of the Thargelia.⁸⁵ In the course of time human sacrifice was mitigated by restricting its victims to condemned criminals, and dulling their senses with wine; finally it was replaced by the sacrifice of an animal. When, on the night before the battle of Leuctra (371 B.C.), the Boeotian leader Pelopidas had a dream that seemed to demand a human sacrifice at the altar as the price of victory, some of his councilors advised it, but others protested against it, saying "that such a barbarous and impious obligation could not be pleasing to any Supreme Beings; that typhons and giants did not preside over the world, but the general father of gods and mortals; that it was absurd to imagine any divinities and powers delighting in slaughter and sacrifice of men."⁸⁶

Animal sacrifice, then, was a major step in the development of civilization. The beasts who bore the brunt of this advance in Greece were the bull, the sheep, and the pig. Before any battle the rival armies sent up sacrifices in proportion to their desired victory; before any assembly in Athens the meeting place was purified by the sacrifice of a pig. The piety of the people, however, broke down at the crucial point: only the bones and a little flesh, wrapped in fat, went to the god; the rest was kept for the priests and the worshipers. To excuse themselves the Greeks told how, in the days of the giants, Prometheus had wrapped the edible portions of the sacrificial animal in skin, and the bones in fat, and had asked Zeus to choose which he preferred. Zeus had "with both hands" chosen the fat. It was true that Zeus was enraged upon finding that he had been deceived; but he had made his choice, and must abide by it forever.⁸⁷ Only in sacrifice to the chthonian gods was everything surrendered to the deity, and the entire animal burnt to ashes in a *holocaust*; the divinities of the lower world were

* These victims in Athens were called *pharmakoi*, which meant originally magicians; *pharmakon* meant a magic spell or formula, then a healing drug.⁸⁸ The question whether the *pharmakoi* were really slain is in dispute; but there is little doubt that the sacrifice was originally literal.⁸⁹

more feared than those of Olympus. No common meal followed a chthonic sacrifice, for that might tempt the god to come and join the feast. But after sacrifice to the Olympians the worshipers, not in awed atonement to the god but in joyous communion with him, consumed the consecrated victim; the magic formulas pronounced over it had, they hoped, imbued it with the life and power of the god, which would now pass mystically into his communicants. In like manner wine was poured upon the sacrifice, and then into the cups of the worshipers, who drank, so to speak, with the gods.⁷⁰ In the *thiasoi*, or fraternities, into which so many trade and social groups in Athens were organized, this idea of divine communion in a common religious meal formed the binding tie.⁷¹

Animal sacrifice continued throughout Greece until ended by Christianity,⁷² which wisely substituted for it the spiritual and symbolical sacrifice of the Mass. In some measure prayer too became a substitute for sacrifice; it was a clever amendment that commuted offerings of blood into litanies of praise. In this gentler way man, subject to chance and tragedy at every step, consoled and strengthened himself by calling to his aid the mysterious powers of the world.

V. SUPERSTITIONS

Between these upper and nether poles of Greek religion, the Olympian and the subterranean, surged an ocean of magic, superstition, and sorcery; behind and below the geniuses whom we shall celebrate were masses of people poor and simple, to whom religion was a mesh of fears rather than a ladder of hope. It was not merely that the average Greek accepted miracle stories—of Theseus rising from the dead to fight at Marathon, or of Dionysus changing water into wine:⁷³ such stories appear among every people, and are part of the forgivable poetry with which imagination brightens the common life. One could even pass over the anxiety of Athens to secure the bones of Theseus, and of Sparta to bring back from Tegea the bones of Orestes;⁷⁴ the miraculous power officially attributed to these relics may well have been part of the technique of rule. What oppressed the pious Greek was the cloud of spirits that surrounded him, ready and able, he believed, to spy upon him, interfere with him, and do him evil. These demons were always seeking to enter into him; he had to be on his guard against them at all times, and to perform magical ceremonies to disperse them.

This superstition verged on science, and in some measure forecast our germ theory of disease. All sickness, to the Greek, meant possession by an alien

spirit; to touch a sick person was to contract his uncleanness or "possession"; our bacilli and bacteria are the currently fashionable forms of what the Greeks called *keres* or little demons.⁷⁶ So a dead person was "unclean"; the *keres* had gotten him once for all. When the Greek left a house where a corpse lay, he sprinkled himself with water, from a vessel placed for such purposes at the door, to drive away from himself the spirit that had conquered the dead man.⁷⁷ This conception was extended to many realms where even our bacteriophobia would hardly apply it. Sexual intercourse rendered a person unclean; so did birth, childbirth, and homicide (even if unintentional). Madness was possession by an alien spirit; the madman was "beside himself." In all these cases a ceremony of purification was considered necessary. Periodically homes, temples, camps, even whole cities were purified, and very much as we disinfect them—by water, smoke, or fire.⁷⁸ A bowl of clean water stood at the entrance to every temple, so that those who came to worship might cleanse themselves,⁷⁹ perhaps by a suggestive symbolism. The priest was an expert in purification; he could exorcise spirits by striking bronze vessels, by incantations, magic, and prayer; even the intentional homicide might, by adequate ritual, be purified.⁸⁰ Repentance was not indispensable in such cases; all that was needed was to get rid of the evil possessive demons; religion was not so much a matter of morals as a technique of manipulating spirits. Nevertheless the multiplication of taboos and purificatory rites produced in the religious Greek a state of mind surprisingly akin to the Puritan sense of sin. The notion that the Greeks were immune to the ideas of conscience and sin will hardly survive a reading of Pindar and Aeschylus.

Out of this belief in an enveloping atmosphere of spirits came a thousand superstitions, which Theophrastus, successor to Aristotle, summarized in one of his *Characters*:

Superstitiousness would seem to be a sort of cowardice with respect to the divine. . . . Your Superstitious Man will not sally forth for the day till he have washed his hands and sprinkled himself at the Nine Springs, and put a bit of bay-leaf from a temple in his mouth. And if a cat cross his path he will not proceed on his way till some one else be gone by, or he have cast three stones across the street. Should he espy a snake in his house, if it be one of the red sort he will call upon Dionysus; if it be a sacred snake he will build a shrine then and there. When he passes one of the smooth stones set up at crossroads he anoints it with oil from his flask, and will not go his ways till he have knelt down and worshiped it. If a mouse gnaw a bag of his meal, he will off to the wizard and ask what he must do; and if the advice be, "Send the bag to the cobblers to be patched," he neglects the advice and frees himself of the ill by rites of aversion.

. . . If he catches sight of a madman or an epileptic, he shudders and spits into his bosom.⁸⁰

The simpler Greeks believed, or taught their children to believe, in a great variety of bogies. Whole cities were disturbed, at short intervals, by "portents" or strange occurrences, like deformed births of animals or men.⁸¹ The belief in unlucky days was so widespread that on such days no marriage might take place, no assembly might be held, no courts might meet, no enterprise might begin. A sneeze, a stumble, might be reason for abandoning a trip or an undertaking; a minor eclipse could stop or turn back armies, and bring great wars to a disastrous end. Again, there were persons gifted with the power of effective cursing: an angered parent, a neglected beggar might lay upon one a curse that would ruin one's life. Some persons possessed magic arts; they could mix love philters or aphrodisiacs, and could by secret drugs reduce a man to impotence or a woman to sterility.⁸² Plato did not consider his *Laws* complete without an enactment against those who injure or slay by magic arts.⁸³ Witches are not medieval inventions; note Euripides' *Medea*, and Theocritus' *Simaetha*. Superstition is one of the most stable of social phenomena; it remains almost unchanged through centuries and civilizations, not only in its bases but even in its formulas.

VI. ORACLES

In a world so crowded with supernatural powers, the events of life seemed to depend upon the will of demons and gods. To discover that will the curious Greeks consulted soothsayers and oracles, who divined the future by reading the stars, interpreting dreams, examining the entrails of animals, or observing the flight of birds. Professional soothsayers hired themselves out to families, armies, and states;⁸⁴ Nicias, before setting out upon the expedition to Sicily, engaged a troop of sacrificers, augurs, diviners;⁸⁵ and though not all generals were as pious as this great slaveowner, nearly all were as superstitious. Men and women appeared who claimed inspiration and clairvoyance; in Ionia particularly certain women called Sibyls (i.e., the Will of God) issued oracles believed by millions of Greeks.⁸⁶ From Erythrae the Sibyl Herophila was said to have wandered through Greece to Cumae in Italy, where she became the most famous of her kind, and lived, we are told, a thousand years. Athens, like Rome, had a collection of ancient oracles, and the government maintained in the prytaneum men skilled in their interpretation.⁸⁷

Public oracles were set up at many temples in all parts of Greece; but the most famous and honored were in early days the oracle of Zeus at

Dodona, and in the historical period that of Apollo at Delphi. "Barbarians" as well as Greeks consulted this oracle; even Rome sent messengers to ask or suggest the will of the god. Since the power of divination was supposed to belong particularly to the intuitive sex, three priestesses, each at least half a century old, were trained to consult Apollo through the medium of a trance. From a hollow in the earth below the temple came a peculiar gas, ascribed to the eternal decomposition of the python that Apollo had slain there; the officiating priestess, called Pythia, took her seat on a high tripod over this cleft, inhaled the divine stench, chewed narcotic laurel leaves, fell into delirium and convulsions, and, thus inspired, uttered incoherent words which the priests translated to the people. Very often the final reply admitted of diverse, even contrary, interpretations, so that the infallibility of the oracle was maintained whatever the event.⁸⁸ Possibly the priests were no less puppets than the priestesses; sometimes they accepted bribes;⁸⁹ and in most cases the voice of the oracle harmonized melodiously with the dominant influence in Greece.⁹⁰ Nevertheless, where external powers did not constrain them, the priests taught valuable lessons of moderation and political wisdom to the Greeks. Though they condoned human sacrifice even after the moral sense of Greece had begun to revolt against it, and made no protest against the immoralities of Olympus, they aided the establishment of law, encouraged the manumission of slaves, and bought many slaves in order to give them liberty.⁹¹ They were not in advance of Greek thought, but they did not hinder it by doctrinal intolerance. They gave a helpful supernatural sanction to necessary Greek policies, and provided some degree of international conscience and moral unity for the scattered cities of Greece.

Out of this unifying influence came the oldest known confederation of Greek states. The Amphictyonic League was originally the religious alliance of the peoples "dwelling around" the sanctuary of Demeter near Thermopylae. The chief constituent states were Thessaly, Magnesia, Phthiotis, Doris, Phocis, Boeotia, Euboea, and Achaea. They met semiannually, in spring at Delphi, in autumn at Thermopylae. They bound themselves never to destroy one another's cities, never to allow the water supply of any member city to be shut off, never to plunder—or permit to be plundered—the treasury of Apollo at Delphi, and to attack any nation that violated these pledges. Here was the outline of a League of Nations; an outline whose completion was prevented by the natural fluctuations of wealth and power among states, and the inherent rivalries of men and groups. Thessaly formed a bloc of vassal states, and permanently dominated the League.⁹²

Other amphictyonies were established; Athens, for example, belonged to the Amphictyony of Calauria; and the rival leagues, while promoting peace within their membership, became against other groups vast instruments of intrigue and war.

VII. FESTIVALS

If it could not end war Greek religion succeeded in alleviating the routine of economic life with numerous festivals. "How many victims offered to the gods!" cried Aristophanes; "how many temples, statues . . . sacred processions! At every moment of the year we see religious feasts and garlanded victims" of sacrifice.⁸⁸ The rich paid the cost, the state provided the *theorika*, or divine funds, to pay to the populace the price of admission to the games or plays that distinguished the holyday.

The calendar at Athens was essentially a religious calendar, and many months were named from their religious festivals. In the first month, Hecatombaion (July-August), came the Cronia (corresponding to the Roman Saturnalia), when masters and slaves sat down together to a joyful feast; in the same month, every fourth year, occurred the Panathenaea, when, after four days of varied contests and games, the entire citizenship formed a solemn and colorful procession to carry to the priestess of Athena the sacred peplos, a gorgeously embroidered robe which was to be placed upon the image of the city's goddess; this, as all the world knows, was the theme that Pheidias chose for the frieze of the Parthenon. In the second month, Metageitnion, came the Metageitnia, a minor festival in honor of Apollo. In the third month, Boedromion, Athens sallied forth to Eleusis for the Greater Mysteries. The fourth month, Pyanepsion, celebrated the Pyanepsia, the Oscophoria, and the Thesmophoria; in this the women of Athens honored Demeter Thesmophoros (the Lawgiver) with a strange chthonian ritual, parading phallic emblems, exchanging obscenities, and symbolically going down to Hades and returning, apparently as magical ceremonies to promote fertility in the soil and man.⁸⁹ Only the month of Maimakterion had no festival.

In the month of Poseideon Athens held the Italoa, a feast of first fruits; in Gamelion the Lenaea, in honor of Dionysus. In Anthesterion came three important celebrations: the Lesser or preparatory Mysteries; the Diasia, or sacrifice to Zeus Meilichios; and, above all, the Anthesteria, or Feast of Flowers. In this three-day spring festival to Dionysus wine flowed freely, and everybody was more or less drunk;⁹⁰ there was a competition in wine drinking, and the streets were alive with revelry. The king-archon's wife rode on a car beside the image of Dionysus, and was married to it in the temple as a symbol

of the union of the god with Athens. Beneath this jolly ritual ran a somber undertone of fear and propitiation of the dead; the living ate a solemn meal in commemoration of their ancestors, and left for them pots full of food and drink. At the end of the feast the people chased the spirits of the departed from the house with a formula of exorcism: "Out of the door with you, souls! Anthesteria is over"—words that became a proverbial phrase for dismissing importunate beggars.*

In the ninth month, Elaphebolion, came the Great Dionysia, established by Peisistratus in 534; in that year Thespis inaugurated the drama at Athens as part of the festival. It was the end of March, spring was in the air, the sea was navigable, merchants and visitors crowded the city and swelled the attendance at the ceremonies and the plays. All business was suspended, all courts were closed; prisoners were released to let them share in the festivities. Athenians of every age and class, brilliantly attired, took part in the procession that brought the statue of Dionysus from Eleutherae and placed it in his theater. The rich drove chariots, the poor marched on foot; a long train of animals followed as destined gifts for the gods. Choruses from the towns of Attica joined or competed in song and dance.—In the tenth month, Munychion, Athens celebrated the Munychia, and Attica, every fifth year, celebrated the Brauronia in honor of Artemis. In Thargelion occurred the Thargelia, or feast of the grain harvest. In the twelfth month, Skirophorion, came the festivals of Skirophoria, Arretophoria, Dipolia, and Bouphonia. Not all these feasts were annual; but even for a four-year period they represented a grateful relief from daily toil.

Other states had similar holidays; and in the countryside every sowing and every harvest was greeted with festal conviviality. Greater than all these were the Panhellenic festivals, the *panegyreis*, or universal gatherings. There were the Panionia on Mycale, the feast of Apollo at Delos, the Pythian festival at Delphi, the Isthmian at Corinth, the Nemean near Argos, the Olympic in Elis. These were the occasions of interstate games, but basically they were holydays. It was the good fortune of Greece to have a religion human enough—in later days humane enough—to associate itself joyfully and creatively with art, poetry, music, and games, even, at last, with morality.

VIII. RELIGION AND MORALS

At first sight Greek religion does not seem to have been a major influence for morality. It was in origin a system of magic rather than of ethics, and remained so, in large measure, to the end; correct ritual received more

* In many parts of Europe the people still believe that the ghosts of the dead return to earth yearly, and must be entertained in a "Feast of All Souls."⁹⁸

emphasis than good conduct, and the gods themselves, on Olympus or on earth, had not been exemplars of honesty, chastity, or gentleness. Even the Eleusinian Mysteries, though they offered supernatural hopes, made salvation depend upon ritual purifications rather than upon nobility of life. "Pataikion the thief," said the sarcastic Diogenes, "will have a better fate after his death than Agesilaus or Epaminondas, for Pataikion has been initiated at Eleusis."⁷⁷

Nevertheless, in the more vital moral relations Greek religion came subtly to the aid of the race and the state. The purification ritual, however external in form, served as a stimulating symbol of moral hygiene. The gods gave a general, if vague and inconstant, support to virtue; they frowned upon wickedness, revenged themselves upon pride, protected the stranger and the suppliant, and lent their terror to the sanctity of oaths. Dike, we are told, punished every wrong, and the awful Eumenides pursued the murderer, like Orestes, to madness or death. The central acts and institutions of human life—birth, marriage, the family, the clan, the state—received a sacramental dignity from religion, and were rescued from the chaos of hasty desire. Through the worship or honoring of the dead, the generations were bound together in a stabilizing continuity of obligations, so that the family was not merely a couple and their children, or even a patriarchal assemblage of parents, children, and grandchildren, but a holy union and sequence of blood and fire stretching far into the past and the future, and holding the dead, the living, and the unborn in a sacred unity stronger than any state. Religion not only made the procreation of children a solemn duty to the dead, but encouraged it through the fear of the childless man that no posterity would inter him or tend his grave. So long as this religion kept its influence, the Greek people reproduced themselves vigorously, and as plentifully among the best as among the worst; and in this way, with the help of a merciless natural selection, the strength and quality of the race were maintained. Religion and patriotism were bound together in a thousand impressive rites; the god or goddess most revered in public ceremony represented the apotheosis of the city; every law, every meeting of the assembly or the courts, every major enterprise of the army or the government, every school and university, every economic or political association, was surrounded with religious ceremony and invocation. In all these ways Greek religion was used as a defense by the community and the race against the natural egoism of the individual man.

Art, literature, and philosophy first strengthened this influence, and then weakened it. Pindar, Aeschylus, and Sophocles poured their own ethical

fervor or insight into the Olympian creed, and Pheidias ennobled the gods with beauty and majesty; Pythagoras and Plato associated philosophy with religion, and supported the doctrine of immortality as a stimulus to morals. But Protagoras doubted, Socrates ignored, Democritus denied, Euripides ridiculed the gods; and in the end Greek philosophy, hardly willing it, destroyed the religion that had molded the moral life of Greece.