

Radcliffe EDMONDS

Pure from the pure and the sheep from the goats: 'Orphism', 'Magic', and the (re)constructions of ancient Greek religion

"Religion," J. Z. Smith provocatively notes, "is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization." The history of scholarship on the religious phenomena of the ancient world labeled 'Orphism' and 'magic' certainly seems to bear out this charge, since the fabrication of these two categories owes much to prejudices and concerns of the scholars of religion and anthropology in the 19th and 20th centuries. Smith's 'acts of comparison and generalization', however, are performed not only by modern scholars, but also by ancient thinkers whose motivations are often as prejudiced as those of modern scholars. Their prejudices, however, are different from those of modern scholars, and, as such, constitute in and of themselves important data for the understanding of Greek religious ideas. If 'religion' is a construct that varies from the perspective of the one constructing the category and the circumstances of the construction, we, as modern scholars, can re-construct the religious ideas of the ancient Greeks by paying close attention to the generalizations and comparisons made by ancient thinkers and the circumstances in which they made them.

Many of the data labeled 'Orphic' or 'magic' by modern scholars can, when viewed from this perspective, provide information about the ways the ancient Greeks constructed their ideas of religion, normal and abnormal. As Smith has also noted, the act of comparison is never neutral but always normative, intended to show that one of the terms is somehow better than the other. The particular frame of reference for comparison in any given description of Greek religion (e.g., Herodotus' Panhellenic model, Pausanias' description of the practices of different poleis, or even Demosthenes' individualized depiction of the religious behavior of Aischines' mother) is selected to suit the agenda of the one making the comparison. In each comparison, an implicit or explicit norm is contrasted with an abnormality. Normality, however, is double-edged; it can be either better or worse than the abnormal. Not only can the margins be defined by those in the center who want to exclude or devalue others, but abnormal behavior can be self-defined by those who wish to devalue the norm in contrast to their own superior behavior. In either case, a picture of 'normal religion' is constructed. While the accusations of magic hurled at Tiresias or Apuleius have proved fruitful sources for the understanding of ancient definitions of magic, it is also important to note the positive self-definitions of Empedokles or some of the Greek Magical Papyri. Likewise, the critiques of Theophrastus, Plato, or Euripides' Theseus against those who look to Orpheus must be compared with the claims on the 'Orphic' gold tablets or Euripides' Cretans. For both 'magic' and 'Orphism', we can distinguish self-definitions of special status from the constructions by others of these categories of abnormal practice. Both of these types of ancient constructs, however, differ significantly from modern constructs of 'magic' and 'Orphism'. The double nature of these extra-ordinary categories can help make sense of the curious constellation of miracle and charlatantry, of purity and impiety, that appears in the ancient evidence for 'magic' and 'Orphism'.