

In current scholarship in particular of the Anglo-American world, polis religion has become the standard interpretative model for the study of Greek religion. While many works are implicitly based on a definition of Greek religion as polis religion, the strengths and weaknesses of this model are rarely discussed. My paper offers a critical evaluation of this concept, discusses the ways in which some scholars have recently sought to overcome the polis orientation implicit in large parts of the work done in this field, and outlines some preliminary thoughts on how the model of polis religion could be integrated into a more comprehensive Greek theology.

Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood coined the term polis religion to describe the ‘embeddedness’ of Greek religion in the polis as the basic unit of Greek social and political life (Sourvinou-Inwood 1995, 2000). My paper starts with an evaluation of the concept of ‘embeddedness’ itself. I argue that it is helpful to conceptualize the relationship between the religious order and the socio-political order of the polis but does not encompass the entire spectrum of Greek religious beliefs and practices. As Walter Burkert has rightly pointed out: “There is religion without the polis, even if there is no polis without religion (Burkert 1985, 203).”

I then move on to show that works based on the model of polis religion frequently assume the polis to be a relatively closed hermeneutic system with an internally consistent symbolic order. This, as Hendrik Versnel, Paul Veyne and Sally Humphreys have shown, leaves too little space for inconsistencies and diverging religious beliefs and practices (Versnel 1990, 1993, Veyne 1983, Humphreys 2004).

A third point of criticism is the impact of the model on the study of local cults. The systemic character of Greek religion implied in the model of polis religion frequently has the effect of entirely obscuring local differences. If they are included in the picture, the study of local cults frequently takes one of two forms. They are either depicted as elements that simply mirror on a local level the features of Greek religion as a whole or are studied entirely divorced from the larger contexts of Greek religion.

Just as the model has difficulties in covering local cults, it does not offer a comprehensive framework for the study of Greek religion beyond the classical period. New forms of worship were introduced during the Hellenistic and Roman periods, for example cults like those of Isis and Sarapis or that of emperor worship. Such cults took their legitimacy and their binding force from contexts of social and political life beyond the polis.

The most significant problem, however, lies in the widespread exclusion of the intellectual dimension of Greek religion from studies exploring religious practices. The paper concludes with the suggestion that a cognitive approach, which asks how religious practices ‘made sense’ to those involved in them, is able to reintegrate the study of Greek religious beliefs and practices.