Heraclitus on Religion

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ABSTRACT
The article sets out to reinterpret Heraclitusô views on religion and, by implication, his position in the context of the Presocratic philosophersô relationship to the Greek cultural tradition. It does so by examining the fragments in which Heraclitusô attitude to the popular religion of his time is re ected. The analysis of the fragments 69, 68, 15, 14, 5, 96, 93 and 92 DK reveals that the target of Heraclitusô criticism is not the religious practices themselves, but their popular interpres ()]TJ1 0 0 1 1304 nt7 (.) -243 ()]TJ1 0 0 1 65419622 Tm[(i)H -27 (r) -27 (pr) -2

from insight into the essence of being.Ô[2] That is in spite of the explicit antagonism, on HeraclitusÕ part, to XenophanesÕ intellectual enterprise (cf. fr. 40).

If we turn to Heraclitean scholarship, the dominating picture appears to be even more unequivocal. Heraclitus is credited with illuministico radicalismo in matters of religion by Marcovich,[3] whereas according to Kahn, ÔHe is a radical, an uncompromising rationalist, whose negative critique of the tradition is more extreme than that of Plato a century later. [. . .] He denounces what is customary among men [. . .] as a tissue of folly and falsehoodÕ; also, Ôin this polemic HeraclitusÕ predecessor is Xenophanes. . . .Õ[4] Conche also sees in HeraclitusÕ thought continuation of XenophanesÕ project: LÕabsurditÉ, la dÉraison des dieux de la religion populaire sont le reflet du dÉlire et de la dÉraison, voire de la cruautÉ de lÕhomme, leur auteur. Cela avait dÉjà ÉtÉ indiquÉ, avant HÉraclite, par XÉnophane dans ses Silles.[5]

Why should the way Heraclitus related to the practices and beliefs current in the popular religion of his time be so important? At stake is, I propose, the relationship between philosophy in statu nascendi and one of the more important aspects of the Greek cultural tradition. Were all the early philosophic attempts characterised by emancipation from traditional piety, as the conventional opinion of scholars would have us believe? Or was there a more complex pattern in the relationship to traditional religion, represented by one of the most prominent proponents of the enterprise that had yet to define itself as Ôphilosophy Õ?

In what follows, I shall provide an alternative interpretation of the fragments dealing with the rituals and cults of traditional Greek religion.[6]

[2] W. Burkert. Greek Religion. Archaic and Classical. Transl. by J. Raffan. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985. P. 309.

[3] Eraclito. Frammenti. Introduzione, traduzione e commento a cura di M. Marcovich. Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1978. P. 284.

[4] C.H. Kahn. The Art and Thought of Heraclitus. An edition of the fragments with translation and commentary. Cambridge University Press, 1979. P. 263, 266.

[5] HÉraclite. Fragments. Texte Établi, traduit, commentÉ par M. Conche. Paris: PUF, 1986. P. 173.

[6] This intention, as well as certain features of exegesis, notably of the fr. 5, are anticipated by Catherine OsborneÕs chapter on Heraclitus in the recent Routledge History of Philosophy (see Routledge History of Philosophy. Vol. I. From the Beginning to Plato. Ed. by C.C.W. Taylor. London & New York: Routledge, 1997. P. 90-95). However, in a way that will become apparent in the course of the present analysis, I disagree with her conclusion concerning the overall implications of HeraclitusÕ utterances on religion: Ô[Heraclitus] argues that [religious practices] make sense only

Most of the extant fragments of Heraclitus dealing with the forms of traditional Greek piety were quoted during the religious controversies concerning pagan religion, from the 3rd century AD onwards. Curiously enough, the fragments of Heraclitus were employed by both the opponents and the apologists of paganism. The authors who sought Heraclitusô support in that debate were Christian writers – Clement, Arnobius, Origenes, Gregory of Nazianzus, the author of Theosophia Tubingensis, Elias of Crete – as well as pagans: Iamblichus, Celsus, Apollonius of Tyana.

Looking at the fragments themselves one cannot avoid realising how exhaustive they are in representing popular Greek religious practices, the list whereof reads not unlike an attempt at systematic classi cation: sacri ces (fr. 69), mystery cults and initiation rites (fr. 14), worship of ef

and Kahn's

of medical activities: ÔDoctors who cut and burn complain that they do not receive the reward they deserve.Õ[8]

The paradox that Heraclitus uncovers in medical activities is an instance of the governing structure of the Ôunity of oppositesÕ: medical activity appears as the paradoxical unity of both the disease and health; by in icting pain (a characteristic of disease) it heals (i.e., removes pain). Similarly pain may be treated as a single phenomenon that extends over two contrary states: disease and health.

Exegesis of this fragment requires an answer to the following questions: Why is it the case that the actions which otherwise would be ômost shamelessô are not such if they are performed for Dionysus? What is the reason for the identification of Dionysus with Hades? What is the connection between the Dionysiac rituals referred to, and this identification?

An attempt may be made to explain the identification of Dionysus with Hades in terms of Greek mythological

saito oìtv poi¡onta ÔThey purify

tÛnew d¢ oß palaioÜ
parƒ †Ellhsi yeoÜ kaÜ tÛnew oß n¡oi; palaioÜ m¢n oï n oß perÜ Krñnon, n¡oi dƒ
oß □pƒ ¤keÛnvn, kaÜ ¥j°w m¡xri tÇn ¤sx‹tvn ²rÅvn: µ palaioçw m¢n l¡gei toçw dÇ-
deka katƒ ¤keÛnouw, n¡ouw d¢ Diñnuson „Hrakl¡a ƒAsklhpiòn kaÜ toçw loi-
5 poæw, oîw d¯ p‹ntaw sugxeÝn Éw prÅhn protr¡petai õ filñsofow,[1] kaÜ tŒ
perÜ toætvn aÞsxrÇw muyeuñmena, toçw □llokñtouw ¦rvtaw aétÇn kaÜ toçw eÞw poi-
kÛla eàdh metasxhmatismoçw diŒ toçw aÞsxroçw kaÜ ¤mpayeÝw ¦rvtaw, kaÜ tŒw
aÞsxrot¡raw yusÛaw, aÅw yerapeæein toçw aétÇn yeoçw ¤nñmizon, oîw dia-
paÛzvn „Hr‹kleitow, KayaÛrontai d¡, fhsÛn, aámati miainñmenoi Ësper
10 'n eà tiw eÞw phlòn ¤mbŒw phlÒ □ponÛzoito. tò gŒr toÝw tÇn □lñgvn zÐvn
sÅmasÛ te kaÜ aámasin, “ toÝw yeoÝw aétÇn prosƒferon, oàesyai kayaÛrein
tŒw tÇn ÞdÛvn svm‹tvn □kayarsÛaw tŒw ¤k tÇn musarÇn kaÜ □kay‹rtvn
mÛjevn ¤gkexrvsm¡naw aétoÝw, ÷moiñn ge ‹kaÜ›[2] tòn ¤k toè phloè ¤mpeplas-
(fol. 90ᵛ) m¡non =æpon toÝw sÅmasi phlÒ peir□syai □poƒ=æptein.

[1]Scil. Hero [2]kaÜ ins. Bywater

As this text shows, Elias assumes that Heraclitus speaks about the immolation of sacri□cial animals for the atonement of oneÕs sins. He has some dif□culties in explaining how the reduplication of ÔmudÕ is to be understood – therefore he takes ÔmudÕ to mean the impurity of the bodies polluted by sin in the □rst instance, and, somewhat allegorically, Ôbodies and blood of irrational animalsÕ in the second instance. (It is also clear that he understands miainñmenoi in a half-participial sense: ÔThey purify themselves by de□ling / as they de□le themselves with bloodÕ – v. supra, n. 16.)

The author of Theosophia[22] also understands HeraclitusÕ fragment as a reference to sacri□ces: †Oti „Hr‹kleitow memfñmenow toçw yæontaw toÝw daÛmosi ¦fh: (the text of the fragment follows).

If, as FrŠnkel maintains (op. cit., p. 451), the original fragment of Heraclitus had kayaÛrontai dƒ □llÄ aámati miainñmenoi, it explains the

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onwards), transcri0 1 1255 1017iw62n n ad

difference between the versions given by Theosophia and by Elias of Crete. Although it was possible (as Elias did – v. supra) to explain away the double occurrence of ‘mud,’ there is no sense, in the context of ordinary animal sacrifices, in which the reference to ‘other,’ ‘further’ (ΠΙΟΝ) blood could have been understood. Therefore, it is quite plausible to maintain that the word ΠΙΑΔ of the original text could be omitted by Elias (or his source) and corrupted into ΠΙΝΝ by the author of Theosophia (or his source). This corruption makes better and more obvious sense in terms of the project of that section of Theosophia (§§ 67-74): the author is attempting to show that the Greek gods were held in contempt by some of the Greeks. Thus, the pejorative ΠΙΝΝ ‘in vain’ would suit his purpose better. Besides, in some hands of the early Byzantine sloping uncial that would have been used for private notes the iota adscriptum in ΑΛΛΥΙ could easily have been mistaken (or ‘corrected’) into sigma (thus resulting in ΑΛΛΥΣ), since

It is useful to recall, in this connection, fr. 61: ÔThe sea is the purest (kayarÅtaton)he

By saying that ôsuch a man would seem to be raving, if any among men should notice him doing it,õ Heraclitus postulates the difference between the perspective of ômenõ and that of ôgods,õ[25] drawing attention to the different meaning the same action acquires in profane and in ritual contexts.[26] The ritual practice, characterised by the structure of the ôunity of opposites,õ from a secular perspective has as much (or rather, little) sense as the washing of mud with mud – in the religious context, however, it is the structure of the unity of opposites that prevails and makes sense.[27]

[25] One could point, in this context, to fr. 138 wøyow nyrÅm[2fs

(One should notice that in this fragment, as well as in fr. 15, Heraclitus repeatedly characterises the actions of the participants of the ritual as manûa, thus drawing attention to the ambiguity inherent in the phenomenon. What appears to be ômadnessõ from the secular perspective, acquires meaning as the embodiment, in the sphere of ritual, of the structure of the ôunity of opposites;õ and although those that take part in the Dionysiac processions are said to ôraveõ (maûnesyai), it is not, after all, ômost shamelessõ action, which it would be, were it not performed in honour of Dionysus. I shall return to discussion of the signi cance of manûa in connection with fragments 92 & 93.)

So, the main conceptual scheme of Heraclitusõ philosophy – the unity of opposites – is shown not only to be present in the rituals, but, in fact, to constitute the essential structure of the ritual action.

Fr. 5b – kaÜ toÝw g‹lmasi d¢ tout¡oisin eëxontai, õkoÝon eà tiw toÝw dñmoisi lesxhneæoito, oë ti ginÅskvn yeoçw oédƒ´rvaw oátin¡w eÞsi – closely resembles the critique of popular religion and the attack on the veneration of images. However, the qualifying clause at the end of the fragment – ônot knowing what gods and heroes areõ – renders it unlikely that what is intended is unconditional censure.[28]

The conventional translation runs as following: ôAnd they pray to these images as if someone was chatting with houses, not knowing what gods and heroes are.õ The very metaphor Heraclitus uses, likening images of gods to ôhousesõ (dñmoi), testi es that what he has in mind is slightly different from the classic criticisms of idolatry (one such example would be the interpretation of Clement, who says that in this fragment Heraclitus ôreproaches statues for their insensitivityõ (t¯n naisyhsûan ôneidûzontow toÝw g‹lmasi, protrept. 50, 4)). Instead of likening the statues of gods to lifeless stones or pieces of wood (as was the habit of the Christian writers that drew on Isaiah 44, 9-20), Heraclitus speaks of ôhousesõ – he seems to imply a distinction between the ôhouseõ and the ôinhabitantõ that is in a certain way related thaditat

hoi polloi, then, seems to consist in the failure to distinguish gods that are in some – as yet unspeci ed – way related to, and accessible through, their images, from the images themselves. The ultimate qualifying clause con rms the suggestion that the object of Heraclitusô critique is some failure to recognise what gods and heroes are. Since, however, the fragment, apart from this negative observation, does not specify their nature (and there is no reason to suppose it ever did), the present reading seems to end in a certain hermeneutic impasse. Thus the hypothetical reader is referred back to the metaphorical comparison that occupies the central position in the fragment – õkoÝon eà tiw toÝw dñmoisi lesxhneæoito – for the explanation as to ôwhat gods and heroes are.ô Can this analogy shed any further light as to why prayers to statues are a sign of ignorance?

I suggest that it is at this stage, on a deeper scrutiny, that an alternative meaning of the phrase õkoÝon eà tiw toÝw dñmoisi lesxhneæoito is activated: it can also be plausibly translated ôas if someone was having a conversation at home.ô[29] After all, toÝw dñmoisi can quite naturally be read in a locative sense.

How plausible is this scenario of reading? The validity of the rst way of reading is con rmed by the fact that it is adopted by the ancient authorities that are our sources of the fragment – by Celsus, Origenes, and, in all likelihood1 43 Tf43 iv628 1l3m[(at)]TJ˝ 1367 Tm[(re) -23 (ading?) -t

in terms of the opposition junñn (koinñn) vs. àdion, which is of cardinal importance for Heraclitus (see frr. 2, 89, 72, 1, 17, 113, 114), and which can be somewhat imprecisely translated as that of ôuniversalõ vs. ôprivate,õ when by ôprivateõ is meant the privation of truth, the seclusion of ignorant humans from what is universal. (The particularity of their own illusionary worlds is described as sleeping and having dreams in frr. 1, 89, 73 (and probably 26). The seclusion of the multitude from the universal truth of Logos is likened to the privation of the common world of experience caused by deafness (fr. 34) and (Homerôs) blindness (fr. 56, by implication). It is probable that ôbeing at homeõ in fr. 5b is yet another – ôpoliticalõ – metaphor for seclusion from the junñn.) On this reading, the prayer to the statues entails certain confusion between what is universal and what is ôprivateõ, or particular; apparently, it is a case when behaviour that is proper vis-ˆ-vis what is universal is conducted in a situation that is

the rare word yr‹omai Ôto sitÕ, cf. Philetas, fr. 14 ap. Athen. V, 192 e),[34] or, better still, of its Ionic form yreñmenon.)[35]

To return to HeraclitusÕ discussion of the religious images, could the reason for the condemnation of the prayers to statues be that those who pray to statues address gods that are omnipresent, xunoi, in a Ôparticular,Õ in this-or-that statue, deeming it to be more privileged with access to the deity over other places or things, not realising that what they address in their prayers is but what an empty house is to someone who is looking for its inhabitant? In such case they would indeed be like someone who tried to have a public conversation in the seclusion of their home.[36]

In this fragment we get closest to what could be termed a critique of the religious practices. Yet failure to recognise, and seclusion from, the universal logos that is always at hand is a common predicament of the ignorant multitude (cf. frr. 1, 72, 17, 2 et al.). Thus it would seem

a deeper meaning that can be described in terms of Heraclitusô own philosophy.

Fr. 96 – nekuew koprûvn ¤kblhtñteroi – has earned the title of ôa studied insult to ordinary Greek sentimentô from Dodds,[37] and many an interpreter has wondered why the dead body should excite such a fierce censure by

ôearthÕ that functions as a medium of identi cation of dung with god is a later Epicharmean (?) addition in order to reduce HeraclitusÕ paradox into a comic absurdity). And nally, after the radical devaluation of body as such that has become a locus communis since Plato, it would not be surprising if the same sentiment was read into HeraclitusÕ fragment, simultaneously failing to notice its paradoxical content, and only its memorable opening was transmitted through quotations.

It remains to discuss two fragments dealing with another aspect of popular religion – the practice of oracles and prophecy. Fr. 93 speaks of ApolloÕs oracle at Delphi: õ naj oð tò manteÝñn ¤sti tò ¤n DelfoÝw oëte l¡gei oëte kræptei llŒ shmaÛnei ÔThe lord whose oracle is in Delphi neither declares nor conceals, but gives a sign.Õ Fr. 92 is the rst extant mention of the Sibyl: SÛbulla mainom¡nÄ stñmati g¡lasta [kaÜ kallÅpista kaÜ mærista] fyeggom¡nh xilÛvn ¤tÇn ¤jikneÝtai t fvn diŒ tòn yeñn ÔThe Sibyl with raving mouth utters things mirthless [and unadorned and unperfumed], and her voice carries through a thousand years because of the god (scil. that speaks through her).Õ[38]

Since Antiquity it has been assumed that in fr. 93 Heraclitus, describing the practice of the Delphic oracle, formulates a hermeneutic principle that is to be applied in order to understand his own oblique mode of communication which is, in its turn, grounded in the very structure of reality (fragments 56, 123, 54, m[(comD) 2,

pelling reason to disbelieve him, in view of the consensus of other ancient authors quoting or alluding to this fragment (see fr. 75 a^1, b^1, c Marc.)), in fr. 92 Heraclitus is contrasting the exterior aspect of Sibylline prophecies with the god-given truth they carry. Viewed from an 'everyday perspective' the Sibyl

traditional forms of religion and the mythological representations that underlie them, Heraclitus treats religious practices as one of the human practices in which the structure of the ôunity of oppositesõ operates (other such practices are healing (fr. 58), value choices (fr. 110-111), and the begetting of children (fr. 20)). He supplies a

It is the presence (and recognition) of the structure of ôunity-in-opposites' that

life and death, and Apollo is a figure of the unity of truth (or prophetic insight) and madness (fr. 92), as well as of revelation and concealment (fr. 93). If we move to the higher order, the 'gods' of the traditional world-view emerge as one of the elements of a more comprehensive opposition between 'gods' and 'humans' (frr. 53, 62; cf. frr. 30, 24). The opposition between 'gods' and 'humans' reaches its unity in the Pñlemow, one of Heraclitus' names for the ultimate reality that is described through employment of the traditional religious language (v. supra), and is apparently identified with the cosmic 'god.' This ultimate unity of opposites unifies the most fundamental categories of existence (fr. 53) and of experience (fr. 67).[41]

Furthermore, if we accept the view that fr. 10 states the general principle of Heraclitus' theoretical procedure, and that the first pair of terms – sullkciew: ÷la kaü oéx ÷la – could be interpreted as an attempt to describe the dialectical movement of thinking, whereby each newly comprehended 'unity-of-opposites' constitutes simultaneously a 'whole' (in the sense that it is internally complete structure) and 'non-whole' (in the sense that it can be assumed into further synthesis, the previous 'unity5 (i) -25 (e)C

tices are continuous with the underlying theology. Heraclitus, on the contrary, is not a reformer or an AufklŠrer, but an interpreter, who tries to discern the pattern inherent in the existing practices, and exploit it in the construction of his own philosophical theology.

Heraclitus nds in the traditional religious practices the expression of the logos, of the ontological and epistemological structureTJ1 0 0 1 1029 2012 T