CHAPTER THREE

ONE GOD
THREE GREEK EXPERIMENTS IN ONENESS*

Ik hou niet van ‘één.’ ‘Eén’ is zo’n eenzaam woord (I do not like ‘one’. ‘One’ is such a lonesome word).

Liselot (5 year)

ὅθεν καὶ τῶν κατὰ τὸν βίον οἱ μὲν ἕνα φασίν εἶναι θεόν, οἱ δὲ πολλοὺς καὶ διαφόρους ταῖς μορφαῖς (Hence ordinary people differ also, some saying that there is one god, others that there are many gods and of various shapes).

Sext. Emp. Pyr. 3.219

1. Introduction

Ancient Greek religion was, as we have seen in our first chapter, unashamedly polytheistic. Hence the subject of the present chapter, that of ‘oneness’ in Greek religion Archaic, Classical and Hellenistic, may come as a surprise. I will discuss three Greek modes of by-passing, negotiating, reconciling, in short of coping with the alarming complexity of divine manifestations. The three relevant sections are entitled: “One and many,” “Many is one,” and “One is the god.” The first concerns the Archaic, the last the Hellenistic period, the second discusses a phenomenon that can be found throughout Greek history. All three are ‘experiments in oneness’, which, on the face of it, attempt to redefine a diversity of phenomena as being basically a unity. I hope to show, however, that none of these theologies aims at fusing the polytheistic plurality itself into one unifying system or structure. Rather, in each of them, though in singularly different ways, the plurality and

* This title is both an indication of what this chapter is about and an allusion to my book TER UNUS (1990), on which the third section of the present chapter leans heavily and to which in this chapter I shall refer by its title in order to avoid an irritating repetition of ‘Versnel 1990’. I wish to express my deep gratitude to Barbara Porter for her scrutiny in trying to clear the text of an earlier version (published in Porter 2000, 79–163) from flaws and barbarisms in the English and even more for her acute comments on lack of clarity in argument or composition as well as for her numerous suggestions for improvement.
multiformity of polytheism remains unaffected: ‘the many gods’ do not merge into ‘the one’ nor are they explained as emanations or aspects of the one. Both, many and one, maintain a more or less independent position in the conceptual world of the believers.\footnote{This may also serve as a clarification of the position I defend in \textit{TER UNUS}, which Price 1999, 11 n. 3 seriously misrepresents when he ranges me among those scholars who “have sought to ‘rescue’ polytheism by arguing for an element of monolatry or henotheism, in which the power of one god in the pantheon is proclaimed as supreme.” If, as becomes apparent in recent scholarly discussion (e.g. Athanassiadi & Frede 1999; Mitchell & Van Nuffelen 2010), I indeed have contributed to reanimating the study of henotheistic tendencies in Greek religion, the very last objective of that was thus to “rescue polytheism” (nor to attack it, for that matter).}

As a matter of fact, my exposition sprouts from a critical reflection on the dogmatic modern idea(?) of ‘unity in diversity’, often advanced with more conviction than supportive argument. The axiom, endorsed by many a specialist, that the Greeks perceived an underlying unity in the diversity of religious phenomena,\footnote{Or, at the least, did not experience a divide between the two. Just a few instances out of many: E. Meyer, \textit{Geschichte des Altertums} III (1937) 706: “In Griechenland vollends hat die Frage, ob ein Gott oder viele Götter, kaum eine Rolle gespielt; ob die göttliche Macht als Einheit oder als Vielheit gedacht wird, ist irrelevant…..”; Th. Zielinski, \textit{La religion de la Grèce antique} (transl. Paris 1926) 125 f.: “dans le domaine divin, l’unité et la multiplicité se confondent”; Rudhardt 1966, 355: “ce qui est essentiel au polythéisme, c’est que l’unité du divin et la pluralité des noms ou des figures divines, la pluralité des dieux, ne sont pas senties par eux comme contradictoire.” And so on and so forth. Gladigow 1990b, 249 f., already argued against such an “alle Lebenszüge umfassenden Sinntotalität” as generally attributed to pre-modern societies by sociologists of religion. In anthropology the quest for wholeness is under critical discussion. See e.g. K.P. Ewing, The Illusion of Wholeness: Culture, Self, and the Experience of Inconsistency, \textit{Ethos} 18 (1990) 251–278. The author suggests that the observer will always maintain \textit{the illusion} of wholeness, despite the presence of multiple inconsistent self-representations that are context-dependent and may shift rapidly. Confronted with inconsistencies, they are “adept at using multiple rhetorical strategies, relying on ambiguity and tropes to establish a position.” Even more essentially I.C. Jarvie, \textit{Rationality and Relativism: In Search of a Philosophy and History of Anthropology} (London 1984) 15, censures the anthropologist’s drive to find integrity of society and culture: the apparently ‘irrational’ behaviour and conceptions of the alien culture are made harmless by taking them as elements of a holistic system which in itself is after all “ordinary in its own right.” Or cf. M. Strathern, Out of Context: The Persuasive Fictions of Anthropology, \textit{Current Anthropology} 28 (1987) 251–281, espec. 260, who scorns the anthropologist’s main task as “how to manipulate familiar ideas and concepts to convey alien ones.” All this implies that cultures are not the coherent systems they have been assumed to be. Nor are their theologies. See also below n. 230.} in fact leaves us with more questions than answers. What, precisely, do scholars \textit{mean} by such an assertion as for instance in the words of Walter Burkert “the whole