APPENDIX FOUR

DID THE GREEKS BELIEVE IN THEIR GODS?

In Chapter VI I ventured the question:

Did (the) Syracusans believe in the divinity of their rulers? Did (the) Athenians in their ‘theopoetics,’ such as most exemplarily those concerning Demetrios? And what about other Greek cities? And what about Menekrates’ deification?

This question brings us dangerously close to a vexing and in my view sorely misguided recent campaign against the legitimacy of using the terms ‘belief/believe’ in the study of Greek religion. I preferred to reserve a discussion of this phenomenon for the present Appendix.

According to its champions our modern notion ‘belief’ did not and could not ‘exist’ in Greek (or any other traditional non-Christian) religion. Curiously enough, this modish tenet—“something of an orthodoxy in the treatment of Greek religion”¹—does not seem to owe its direct inspiration to earlier studies in the fields of religious studies and anthropology, where a similar discussion developed in the sixties and seventies of the last century. Among the protagonists Needham is the only regular guest in current studies in Greek ‘belief’.² His two main arguments, to which we will return later, are, first, that the term is intrinsically Western and Christian and cannot be translated into the languages of a majority of other cultures, and, second, that the wide range of definitions and lack of a consistent meaning in Western thought makes the term useless for analysis. Others joined his scepticism, as W.C. Smith had already done some years before in his influential book of 1977.³ In the fields of anthropology and theology, however,

¹ Harrison 2000, 18.
these ideas were right from the beginning countered by contemporaneous protagonists.\textsuperscript{4} For a fundamental attack on “the call to move beyond ‘belief’” I may refer to Wiebe 1979, who forcefully argued that the study of religion(s) “is impossible without use of the concept (category) of belief.” Wiebe’s criticism is conclusive, particularly in his rebuttal of the argument that, since originally (i.e. in a Medieval Christian context) the verb ‘believe’ meant ‘having faith’ or ‘pledging allegiance’ and not ‘holding an opinion’, in consequence our modern equation of ‘believing’ with ‘opining’ should be illegitimate.\textsuperscript{5}

Basically, we are confronted here with a clash between cognitive and non-cognitive concepts of religion. And to date it seems that the former have prevailed: the notions belief/believe are thriving in current cognitive study of religion.\textsuperscript{6} Or in the words of Wiebe p. 244: “The conclusion seems inescapable; to talk of religion is to talk of, besides commitments, ideas, interpretations and doctrines.”

In the domain of Greek religion the ‘new creed’\textsuperscript{7} of the ‘non-believers’ rather owes its inspiration to, and indeed has emerged as part and parcel with that other modish ideology, “the new orthodoxy of the


\textsuperscript{4} To mention just a few: J. Hick, \textit{Faith and Knowledge} (Ithaca NY 1966) 4: “Faith as trust (\textit{fiducia}) presupposes faith (\textit{fides}) as cognition of the object of trust;” A.B. Gibson, \textit{Theism and Empiricism} (London 1970) 12: “Religion has an intellectual as well as a moral component. It is not a way of life imposed upon a state of affairs; it is a way of life with a conviction about a state of affairs built into it;” T. McPherson, \textit{Philosophy and Religious Belief} (London 1974) 121: “To describe a belief as a commitment or an affirmation of trust, or something of the sort, does not in itself preclude the raising of questions about the grounds of that belief.”

\textsuperscript{5} Despite the rejoinder by W.C. Smith, Belief: A Reply to a Response, \textit{Numen} 27 (1980) 247–255, who in his \textit{The Meaning and End of Religion} (1962), had already argued against the use of the term ‘religion’ as well, \textit{inter alia} with the very same etymological argument that the word religion goes back to (Latin) \textit{religio} in Roman times (!). For a more general discussion see: D. Wiebe, \textit{The Irony of Theology and the Nature of Religious Thought} (Montreal-Kingston 1991). Cf. also M. Southwold, Religious Belief, \textit{Man} 14 (1979) 628–644, in his altercation with Leach’s very idiosyncratic reductionist views on religious belief. For a recent dispute between King 2003, who defends the use of the term ‘belief’, and the reaction by Giordano-Zecharya 2005, see below.


\textsuperscript{7} I am borrowing here an expression from the title of Yunis 1988, which I mention here for its free use of the term ‘belief’ throughout the book, however without venturing into the discussion about its legitimacy.