CHAPTER FIVE

PANTHEONS AND MEANINGFUL GOD SETS

5.1 Polytheistic Plurality

Central to polytheism is the notion that the divine reveals itself through a multiplicity of forms. Originally, the adjective *polytheos* “designated in the Greek poetic language that which falls to the share of the majority of the gods: an altar or seat of many divinities (Aesh. *Suppl.* 424) or a divine gathering visited by a large number of gods (Lucian *Iupp. trag.* 14).” Then, in Jewish and Christian literature beginning with Philo of Alexandria the concept appeared in the expression *doxa polytheos* as a counterpart to the doctrine of One God, and much later, in the sixteenth century, Jean Bodin coined the term ‘polytheism’ as a French translation ‘polythéisme’ of *polytheótes* in the text of the neoplatonist Proclus.

In a polytheistic society, the implications of the multiple number of deities are pervasive and structuring: in the organization of time, space, stories, and social groups. Through the multiplicity of divine forms, polytheism offers people a range of options for the handling of various life problems, but the notion of ‘deity’ is complex:

there was no such thing as one fixed category of ‘god.’ Rather we are confronted with a type of classification without sharp borders, more especially with a so-called ‘polythetic class,’ a concept first coined by Wittgenstein. Such classes are like families to which all members belong, linked by “a conceptual network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing” without, however, sharing all family resemblances.

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1 When Euripides uses the expression πολλαὶ μορφαὶ τῶν δαιμονίων (e.g., *Bacch.* 1388, *Alc.* 1159, *Andr.* 1284, *Hel.* 1688); *ta daimonia* may equally refer (conceptually, not grammatically) to the things divine and to the divine agency. Such understanding is especially relevant in the *Bacchae* where both the plot and the message of the play hinge upon Dionysos’ practice of taking on different forms of appearance.

2 Bendlin 2001, 80.

3 My summary is based on Bendlin 2001.

Henk Versnel invites us to consider the implications:

we now take a deep breath and bravely prepare ourselves for the conclusion that *hoi theoi* is not always the same as *hoi theoi*, and for the even more terrifying discovery that sometimes *hoi theoi* may be the same as *ho theos*. In other words, (grammatical) plurality does not always imply ‘many,’ but can refer to ‘oneness . . . paradoxically, both *ho theos* and *hoi theoi* may be indicative of both a polytheistic and mon(othe)istic thought pattern.\(^5\)

Ancient Greeks, according to Versnel, consciously utilized the potential for ambiguity inherent in any verbal communication and developed various strategies, ‘experiments in oneness,’ “as, on the face of it, attempts to redefine plurality or diversity of phenomena as being basically a unity.”\(^6\) At the same time, he demonstrates that these experiments never “ousted or absorbed the Many,” that is, divinity understood as plurality. The ancients, he prompts, developed strategies for negotiating plurality, which, however, should not be confused with modern scholarly attempts “‘to reduce the complexity’ of their own object of study.”\(^7\) All contemporary scholarly views of Greek deities (with a partial exception of Versnel) employ etic terminology, which when compared with the emic designations of divine beings highlights important predilections in modern scholarship, predilections that need to be illuminated. For instance, most discussions that focus on ‘gods’ do so without specifying if they apply this term to all divine beings of the Greek pantheons, or only to gods, *theoi*, proper.

We might also like to consider whether a person choosing to use a particular ritual or to approach one particular deity out of the available multitude, could ever do so while closing one’s eyes to the existence of other deities. Would a worshipper need only keep in mind a proper course of interaction with a deity of his choice, or also worry about negotiating his lack of attention to other deities at that moment?\(^8\) No matter how we answer the question about a possible anxiety involved in focusing one’s attention on offering sacrifice to one/several deities at a time, but not to all of them at once (although prayers and invocations regularly employ

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\(^5\) Versnel 2000, 121. See also now 2011, 270–273.

\(^6\) Versnel 2000, 84.

\(^7\) Versnel 2011, 307.

\(^8\) In Greek literature, deities have a potential for being jealous and simply unpredictable (Odysseus forgets to sacrifice to Poseidon with disastrous consequences, Hippolytus neglects Aphrodite, Pentheus does not accept Dionysos), but in cultic practice, various other considerations stand behind worshippers’ perplexity as to which deity they are dealing with (see a most helpful discussion in Versnel 2011, 43–60).