Once a year the effigy of Athena was removed from its old temple in order to be ceremoniously conducted down to the sea, where it was ritually cleansed. For the duration of this ritual, every other temple in the city of Athens was closed, owing to the belief that the absence of the goddess was a bad portent that might signify the intrusion of impurity into the city. Although the Athenians believed more than other Greeks in the presence of ‘their goddess’ in their city, they nevertheless deemed it necessary to protect this special relationship from any pollution through a cyclic purification of the cult statue, in order to preserve its sacral power. A similar ritual was applied to the cult garment of the statue of Athena in the Parthenon, the peplos, which was newly woven every four years and was then presented to the goddess during the great Panathenaea. In the context of this splendid procession, the citizenry of Athens assembled according to their social status and collectively crossed the public space to deliver the new garment to their goddess and to reconstitute the link between her and the city. Therefore, even the items in immediate proximity to the goddess had to be cleansed, as they were in danger of being tainted by human presence, which could impair their sacral potential.

The example of Athens vividly illustrates that people’s everyday lives were strongly affected by the struggle for a positive relationship with the sacral forces. In the context of this struggle, the ever-present categories of purity and pollution served to indicate the degree achieved in establishing a close and reliable connection with the divine powers, which in turn guaranteed a safe environment for the community.

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1 Plutarch, Alc. 34.1–2; Xenophon, Hell. 1.4.12; see also Deubner, *Attische Feste*, 17; 22; Scheer, *Die Gottheit und ihr Bild*, 58–59; Burkert, *Griechische Religion*, 347–48.


3 In regard to the term pure (katharos), primarily used as an adjective, and pollution (miasma), see Rudhardt, *Notions fondamentales*, and Parker, *Miasma*; Bendlin, “Purity and Pollution”; see also Douglas, *Reinheit und Gefährdung*; and Douglas, *Ritual, Tabu und Körpersymbolik*. 
Accordingly, purity in Greece is closely connected with the concept of sacrality and the attempt to secure its presence within the human community.\(^4\) Hence the struggle for purity attempts to increase the potentiality of the sacral in the human sphere and subsequently to enclose it in such ways as to protect it from the harmful—the polluting—influence of the profane.

This intense effort to achieve purity and consequently sacral presence can only be understood by taking into account the specific conditions of the Greeks’ polytheistic conception of the world. In contrast to monotheistic religions, in which the deities’ sphere is strictly separated from that of their mortal believers, polytheistic deities represent transcendental entities whose sphere is closely connected to the human world.\(^5\) The multitude of divine entities, and their genuine claim of being independent sacral powers amongst others, leads to the problem that the gods cannot be ubiquitous as in monotheistic religions. Polytheistic deities depend on the possibility of their being absent in order to explain and guarantee the independent existence and presence of each and every deity. Henceforth,

\(^4\) Bendlin, “Purity”, 180. This strengthening of boundaries and the simultaneous stabilization of a positive connectivity between the sacral and the human spheres is of such fundamental importance in traditional societies because the human order in early communities was seen to be in a very close exchange relationship with its social and also natural environments. Only by a thorough, even scrupulous conforming to codes of conduct was the common reality detached from the cosmic order and thereby given an inner social climate. Its stability was, however, dependent on the maintenance of its identity-establishing boundary with its environment. Therefore extraordinary external impulses had to be prevented from intruding into the interior by employing sacral rituals and other protective measures. For the unity of society and natural order in early civilizations, see Müller, *Das magische Universum*; Hallpike, *Die Grundlagen des primitiven Denkens*; Bellah, *Religious Evolution*, 363–64; see also Dux, *Die Logik der Weltbilder*, 103–22; Dübter, *Zur Logik des Überganges*; Luckmann, “Boundaries of the Social World”. For the emergence of an artificial ‘internal social climate’ as a basis for the formation of human societies, and its consequences, see Claessens, *Das Konkrete und das Abstrakte*, 60–92.

\(^5\) Brelitch, “Polytheismus”, 127; for Ancient Greece see Thomas, “Wingy Mysteries in Divinity”, 182: “Being is not separated into distinct categories in the Hellenic view; rather it is regarded as a continuum with various capabilities found along a band of being that extends from plant to animal to human to deity”. Kearns, “Order, Interaction, Authority”, 519–20; Vernant, *Mythos und Gesellschaft*, 103; Vernant, “Formes de croyance et de rationalité en Grèce ancienne”, 120: “Les dieux sont là, supérieurs à nous, mais, si je puis dire, dans le même monde. D’ailleurs ils n’ont pas créé ce monde, au contraire ils ont été créés par un processus qui s’est déroulé dans le monde lui-même. Ils font partie du monde. Il n’y a pas de transcendance ou en tout cas pas au niveau de la religion: il y a une relative transcendance, bien entendu mais elle n’est pas élaborée intellectuellement pour faire que dieu est supérieure et au-delà de toute ce qui a été créé, créé par lui et à partir de rien, ce qui pour le Grec est absurde.”