CHAPTER 3

Isis and the Evolution of Religions

Greg Woolf

Between the middle of the last millennium BC and the middle of the first AD there was a momentous shift in religious history.¹ A world of religious diversity was replaced by one characterised by a plurality of religions. Versions of this transition can be observed in the ancient Mediterranean world and also in the Near East, Iran, north India and China. Describing and account for this process is a vast project,² and one that depends on precise and detailed studies of individual cults, studies of exactly the kind to which the cult of Isis has been subjected in recent years. This paper aims to set Isis in this larger context, and to ask whether an awareness of these wider changes can contribute to our understanding of her long cultural biography,³ and also how far Isis may provide a paradigm for key moments in the evolution of religions.

The Emergence of Religious Pluralism

There is more consensus about the fact of religious upheaval in this period than about its nature or its origins. One reason is that it is difficult to distinguish the central elements of change from those that were subsidiary or consequential. Should we emphasize the rise of monotheisms at the expense of polytheisms, or the appearance of elements of transcendence? the end of animal sacrifice or the growing centrality of sacred texts? the emergence of individualized religious identities or the growth of powerful hierarchies independent of political authorities? This list is hardly comprehensive.⁴

---

¹ I am grateful to the participants in Boulogne for their comments on the paper delivered there, and for this and for their great patience to the editors as well.

² I gratefully acknowledge the support of the Leverhulme Trust to conduct this larger investigation.


Historians of ancient religion tend to begin from the growing prominence of religious forms that were peripheral to the collective rituals of the classical city-state. John North once summarized these changes in terms of a “development from religion as embedded in the city-state to religion as choice of differentiated groups offering different qualities of religious doctrine, different experiences, insights or just different myths and stories to make sense of the absurdity of human experience.” By “differentiated groups” North meant communities such as Christians, diaspora Jews and the adherents of pagan mystery cults like the Bacchists. Setting them side-by-side, he aimed both to draw attention to some structural similarities, and also to emphasis their mutual awareness, and the likelihood of exchanges between them, especially once conversion became more and more common. It is a programme I shall follow in this paper.

Objections might, naturally, be made to this procedure. It would be possible to respond that what these groups most had in common was their distance from the cults of the classical city. Exactly how we should regard the ‘civic religion’ of the classical city-state is a matter of fierce debate. But it is uncontroversial to say that the most prominent feature of the religious landscape in the archaic and classical periods were the public cults of the city. Their temples dominated the physical environment, their festivals were intimately interwoven with civic, tribal, and ethnic identities. Those cults were controlled by the propertied classes, especially their male members, whose social and political ascendancy they naturalized by asserting a homology between the temporal and cosmological order. Other religious forms were at best supplements,

---


6 Debates over terminology and taxonomy have plagued this subject. I shall use ‘movements’, ‘groups’ and ‘religions’ in full awareness that none of these terms are without their problems.