J. P. Vernant

CHAPTER V

The Society of The Gods[1]

In writing of the Greek gods – and especially of their birth – the gaps in the information we possess, and our ignorance concerning their origins, certainly constitute major obstacles. However, the little knowledge that I may lay claim to on this subject does not make the task any easier. How can such a vast and complex problem be tackled in the space of a few pages without much simplification and a certain measure of distortion? Perhaps I may rather be permitted to discount from consideration a number of interpretations that today seem too outdated, too dubious, or too premature to be of any help in understanding the religious facts.

First, what is the position as regards the problem of origins or, to put the question in the terms in which it has been addressed to me, what do we know of the birth of the Greek gods? An inquiry into origins is always difficult. In the case of the Greeks we are completely in the dark. However far back we may go into the past (that is to say, since the decipherment of Linear B, as far as the Mycenaean period), we are confronted with a religious system that has already undergone many transformations and borrowed much, and in which it is very difficult to distinguish what is Indo-European, Mediterranean, Aegean, or Asiatic. Any attempt at a global explanation, such as the suggestion that the great male gods have an Indo-European origin and the great female deities a Mediterranean one must be open to question.

Furthermore, what is true for a linguistic system is also true

for a religious one. In the study of a language, etymology offers possibilities and is sometimes rewarding. In the history of religions etymology is much more obscure, but even in the case of a language etymology cannot enlighten us as regards the use of a term at a particular period, since the native speakers, when they use it, are unaware of its etymology. Thus a word's meaning depends not so much on its linguistic past but rather on the place the word occupies in relation to the general system of the language at the period in question. Similarly, a Greek of the fifth century may well have known less about the origins of Hermes than a specialist does today, but that did not stop him from believing in Hermes and from sensing the presence of the god in certain circumstances. And what we are trying to understand is precisely what Hermes represented in the religious thought and life of the Greeks – the place that this god held in men's existence.

Let us consider one of the examples most favorable to an inquiry into origins, that of Zeus, the greatest god in the pantheon. It so happens that the name of this god is informative. Behind the name of Zeus we can detect the Indo-European root that we find in the Sanscrit *dyau'h*, meaning "to shine." We can consequently connect the Greek *Zeus pater* with the Latin Jupiter and the Indian *Dyaus pita*. But the Greek Zeus is not only an Indo-European god; he has come into contact with other male deities, in particular a Cretan cave god with whom he merged. This Cretan god differs in many respects from the Indo-European Zeus: He is a child god, *Zeus kouros*; he is also a god who dies and is reborn. His tomb used to be pointed out in Crete. The Greek Zeus is the result of these fusions and transformations. What we are seeking to understand is this complex figure, rather more than his affiliation with the ancient Indo-European god.

There is another danger in etymology. We detect in the word *Zeus* the root meaning "to shine." So we conclude that Zeus represents the luminous sky, the shining light of day. We are then tempted to assume that all the great gods of the pantheon can be similarly equated to other natural forces. Thus Zeus is linked with

shining sky, Poseidon with water, Hephaestos with fire, Hera with air, Hermes with wind Dionysos with vines, Demeter with wheat, and so on. Such an interpretation assumes that the universe in our modern conception can be compared term for term with the Greeks' image of it, expressed through their religion. This would be to suggest that their religious thought had the same structure and same type of organization, and used the same conceptual categories as our own scientific thought, the only difference being that in Greek religion natural forces are animated and personified.

The study of religions today is sufficiently advanced for no specialist still to be convinced by such simple naturalistic explanations. So, in attacking them, I perhaps appear to be pushing at doors that are already wide open. But, after all, the only way to open doors is to push them, and I am hoping that our attack will carry us rather further than just over the threshold.

Zeus is the shining sky but also, in a way, the night sky. He is the master of light and reveals himself in and through light, but he also has the power to blot it out. And, as we shall see, Zeus is many other things besides. He is a god in the strict sense of the word, a *theos*, precisely because he is so many things at the same time – things connected with what, to our eyes, are completely distinct or even opposed domains: the world of nature, the social world, the human world, and the supernatural world.

It is I who am distinguishing between these different spheres because they do appear separate to us today, but the religious thought of the Greeks made no such clear-cut distinctions between man and his internal world, the social world and its hierarchy, the physical universe and the supernatural world or society of the Beyond made up of the gods, the daemons, the heroes, and the dead. This is not to say that the Greeks confused everything together and that theirs was a kind of primitive mentality where everything participated in everything else. The Greeks made distinctions in their religious thought, but not the same ones as we make. They distinguished in the cosmos between different types of powers – multiple forms of power that could take action on

every level of reality, not just in one of the domains we have mentioned, making interventions within man himself as well as in society, in nature, and in the Beyond.

Thus their religion and their pantheon can be seen to be a system of classification, a particular way of ordering and conceptualizing the universe, distinguishing between multiple types of force and power operating within it. So in this sense I would suggest that a pantheon, as an organized system implying definite relations between the various gods, is a kind of language, a particular way of apprehending reality and expressing it in symbolic terms. I am even inclined to believe that, in those ancient times, there existed between language and religion a sort of co-naturality. When one considers religion as a type of thought it appears to date back as far as language itself. What characterizes the human level as opposed to that of other creatures on the animal scale is the presence of these vast mediatory systems – language, tools, and religion.

However, man is not aware of having invented this language of religion. He feels that it is the world itself that speaks this language or, to be more precise, that reality itself is fundamentally language. The universe appears to him as the expression of sacred powers that, in their own particular different forms, constitute the true texture of reality, the being behind appearances, the meaning that lies behind the symbols that manifest it.

Let us focus our inquiry a little more closely. For the ancient Greek, the luminous sky above seemed to establish a connection between him and Zeus. That is not to say that he believed that the sky was Zeus, but rather that certain features of the sky, the influence that it exerted over human life, constituted, as it were, the ways through which the power of Zeus was made manifest to man. Zeus is made manifest by the sky, but he is at the same time hidden by it: A power can only be seen by men through whatever it is that manifests it, but at the same time that power is always greater than its manifestations: It cannot be identified with any single one of them.

So it is not so much that Zeus is the luminous sky, rather that,

for a certain form of power, the luminous sky is simply a way both of being visible and concealing itself. What kind of a power is it? In the case of Zeus, perhaps the least incorrect definition would be to say that what is concerned is the power of sovereignty. One of Zeus' essential features is that, both for the gods and for men, he is enthroned at the summit of the hierarchy, he holds the supreme command and possesses a superior strength that allows him absolute dominion over all others.

Those who are submitted to this sovereign power of Zeus feel the effects of its double and contradictory character. On the one hand this power embodied by the sky, with its regular movements and the periodic cycle of days and seasons, represents a just and ordered sovereignty. At the same time, it also comprises an element of opaqueness and unpredictability. The Greeks make a distinction in the sky between what they call *aither*, the sky that is constantly luminous, the brilliance of an incorruptible zone, and what they call *aer*, that is to say the zone of atmospheric phenomena whose unpredictable violence is of the first importance in the life of men since it is the source of the winds, clouds, and beneficial rain, and also of destructive storms. Zeus' power is a compound of regularity and constancy and, at the same time, unpredictability; it combines aspects of beneficence and of terror. Seen as the sky, then, Zeus already appears in a complex and ambiguous form; he belongs both to the day and to the night and is both auspicious and at the same time inauspicious. But in a way Zeus is also present in everything that evokes sovereign dominion. He is present on the mountain tops – on Mount Pelion where he was worshipped under the name of Zeus akraios, at the summit of Olympos, the mountain that is so high that it links heaven and earth together, and whose rugged peak calls to mind the fortress at Mycenae from which King Agamemnon would survey the flat countryside over which he reigned. Zeus is present in certain trees that are taller than the rest, reaching up through the *aer* as far as the *aither*. This is Zeus Endendros. He is present in the lightning as Zeus Bronten, Keraunios or Kataibates; in the rain as

Ombrios or Huetios, especially in the fertile rains of autumn that herald the season for sowing and thus bring about what can be seen as the divine marriage between the sky and the earth, and here he is known as Zeus Gonaios, Genethlios, Georgos, Maimachtes. Zeus is present in the depths of the earth in the form of the riches which his fertility produces there: Zeus Chthonios, Katachthonios, Plousios, Meilichios. Zeus is present in gold, the metal that is as unchanging as the sky, condensed from the light of the sun whose dazzling beams evoke the brilliance of sovereignty: Here he is Zeus Chrusaor.

However, the power of Zeus is not restricted to these natural forms. It is also at work in human activities and social relations. Zeus is present in the person of the king as Zeus Basileus. There is even a Zeus known as Agamemnon. In particular he is present in the scepter of the king, enabling his decisions to be put into force. In the house of a priest a royal scepter can, by its mere presence, be the focus of the cult addressed to Zeus. Zeus is present at the king's side in all the circumstances in which the human sovereign is exercising a power that comes to him from the gods and that can only be effective through the intermediary of divine powers. Thus, when the king leads his army out to battle he is flanked by Zeus Agetor, Promachos; when he mediates in his council, turning over some plan in his mind, it is Zeus Boulaios; in critical situations, when the people no longer know to which power to address their prayers and come to beg their king to find a way of salvation, he is Zeus Soter. Above all, Zeus is present when the king metes out justice: just as the sovereignty of Zeus in the sky makes the earth rich and fertile, similarly the justice of the king brings prosperity to the entire territory dependent upon him. If the king is unjust his land produces no wheat, the herds do not multiply, and the women produce deformed children. But if the king respects justice and embodies the sovereign power of Zeus, his whole kingdom flourishes in endless prosperity. This same dominion that Zeus has over the universe and the king over his subjects is also exercised by the head of each family in

his own house. So the cult of Zeus also celebrates a number of aspects of him as a domestic deity. When a suppliant who has been ejected from his own home and cut off from his social roots seeks shelter at the hearth of the master of the house, begging for his protection, Zeus Hikesios and Zeus Xenios enter the dwelling with him. Zeus Gamelios presides over legitimate marriage, the essential purpose of which is to place a woman under the domination of her husband and to give her children who will owe respect and obedience to their father. Zeus Herkeios, the Zeus of the enclosure or of the barrier, encompasses the territory over which the head of the family exercises his power, while Zeus Klarios, the apportioner, marks out and protects the boundaries between properties belonging to different masters. Finally, Zeus Ktesios is enthroned in the cellar of the house, in the shape of a jar, as he watches over the riches of the father of the house.

This wide range of epithets given to a god such as Zeus can perhaps help us to glimpse one of the essential functions of the supernatural powers. They make it possible to integrate the human individual into various social groups, each with its own ordered way of functioning and its own hierarchy; and to integrate these social groups, in their turn, into the order of nature which is then made a part of the divine order. So one of the functions of the gods is to impose social order. Emanating as it does from Zeus, the power of the king is truly endowed with efficacy, always provided that it is exercised according to certain rules and in conformity with an established order. The king and his subjects are implicitly agreed upon what might be termed the rules of the game of sovereignty. If the king exceeds his rights it is not simply a matter of an individual being wronged or the social hierarchy being distorted. The whole sacred order of the universe is brought into question by this distortion of just sovereignty. The compromised order has to be reestablished at the expense of the guilty party. Such a reversal of the situation may be seen either as vengeance wreaked by Zeus, who is the guarantor of sovereign power, or equally well as a quasiautomatic way of reintroducing order by

restoring the balance between cosmic forces that have been upset. The two interpretations – the one referring to the vengeance of Zeus and the other to the fatality of destiny (Nemesis or Moira) are not contradictory, for there is a Zeus known as Moiragetes.

In this way the power of Zeus establishes the connections between various types of human activities, social relations, and natural phenomena. It links them together but does not confuse them. The Greeks knew perfectly well that a king was not a force of nature and that a force of nature was not the same as a deity. Nevertheless, they saw them as linked, interdependent, as different aspects of a single divine power.

The expression "divine power" is designed to emphasize the point that the Greek gods are not individuals each with a particular single characteristic form and spiritual life. The Greek gods are powers, not persons. It has been correctly noted that, when referring to the gods, the Greeks make no clear distinction between the use of the singular and that of the plural. The same divine power is sometimes conceived in the singular, for example *charis*, and sometimes in the plural, the *charites*. In the words of Rohde: "The Greek is incapable of imagining a god as a single deity but rather envisages a divine power which can be apprehended now in its unity and now in its diversity."

The representations of gods in myth and literary works particularly emphasize their unity. Homer presents us with a Zeus who, as a figure, possesses a relative unity. When a god is worshipped, however, it is rather the aspect of plurality that is stressed. The living religion of the Greeks knows Zeus not in one single form but rather as many different Zeuses, each with its own epithet peculiar to the cult that links it with its own particular area of activity. In worship, the important thing is to address oneself to the Zeus that is suitable in a particular situation. Thus even while he is protected by Zeus Soter and Zeus Basileus, Xenophon is dogged by the anger of Zeus Meilichios to whom he omitted to offer a sacrifice on the occasion of the festival of the *Diasia*. And he sees nothing strange in being favored by two Zeuses while

at loggerheads with a third. Zeus' unity is not that of a single and unique person but of a power whose various aspects may be manifested in different ways.

If these remarks are correct they must lead us to eliminate another method of analyzing the religious data. Any study that attempted to define the Greek gods independently from one another, as if they were separate and isolated figures, would be in danger of missing an essential point about them. Much erudition has been brought to studies of this kind and they provide us with much highly valued information. However, it is no longer possible today to be satisfied with such an approach. The work of a historian of religion such as Georges Dumézil has clearly shown that, as with a linguistic system, it is impossible to understand a religious system without making a study of how the various gods relate to each other.

Instead of simply drawing up a list of the different deities we must analyze the structure of the pantheon and show how the various powers are grouped, associated together, and opposed to and distinguished from each other. Only in this way can the pertinent features of each god or each group of gods emerge – that is to say, those that are significant from the point of view of religious thought. The study of a god such as Hermes, who is a very complex figure, must first define his relation to Zeus in order to pick out what in particular it is that Hermes contributes to the wielding of sovereign power, and then compare him with Apollo, Hestia, Dionysus, and Aphrodite. Hermes has affinities with all of these gods but is distinguished from each of them by certain modes of action that are peculiar to him.

In the third place, it would be equally mistaken to study the religious data as if it constituted an independent world, quite separate from the material and social life of the Greeks. I believe that, to understand a religion, it is necessary to connect it with the men who lived by it, to seek to understand how these men related to nature through the intermediary of their tools, and to each other through the intermediary of their institutions. For a historian of

religion it is the men who explain the gods, not the reverse. Meanwhile, it must be pointed out that hitherto the history of Greek religion has been concerned to study religious representations and rituals more than to discover the sociology of religious man, the sociology of the believer and of the various types of believer. It is a difficult task that scholars have already undertaken where the great contemporary religions are concerned, but that still remains to be attempted for the religions of the past. Clearly, the task is made the more problematic by the need to consult documentary evidence and the impossibility of pursuing any direct inquiry. But apart from this there is also a preliminary obstacle to be cleared away, namely the existence of certain preconceptions.

The fact is that we approach the study of religions burdened with all the experience contemporary man has inevitably acquired, and with firmly entrenched ideas about the place of religion in man's life and its role in society. Now it is impossible to know *a priori* whether the role played by Greek religion in relation to the men and society of antiquity was the same as that played by contemporary religions in relation to the men and societies of today. We may well wonder whether the function of religion can have been the same in archaic societies, where it dominated social life as a whole, as in modern societies in which the life of the community has been almost completely secularized. Is it not to be expected that, like other important factors in civilization, the religious phenomena too should have their own history reflecting the transformations and changes in meaning that took place? We must therefore ask ourselves to what extent our own religious categories of thought, our own conception of the divine and its relation to men and our concepts of what is sacred and supernatural are applicable to the Greek reality.

For us, the divine is basically external to the world. God transcends the world, as the theologians and philosophers put it. This transcendent deity is the creator of the world and of mankind. It is related to the universe as a craftsman is related to his own creation. The creation does, in a way, bear the imprint of

the creator. However, the creator is beyond his production and moves in a world apart from the world he has produced – and produced from nothing.

This god who is foreign to our own world is present within us. Where else could we find him, since he is outside nature, if not within ourselves? So this is an interior god: The point of contact between the deity and man is within the soul of each individual and takes the form of personal communion between the two. This individual relationship is at the same time universal: The link between each separate individual and God is an expression of the fundamental relationship of man and his creator. I am related to God as a human being and as an individual, not as a Frenchman, or as the member of a particular profession, a particular family, or a particular social group.

Finally, in the life of a contemporary man, the religious sphere is in general fairly closely defined. We consider most of our social, economic, cultural, and political activities, our work, our leisure, our reading, our entertainment, and our family relations to be outside the strictly religious sphere and as constituting the secular domain. Religion is thus restricted to one definite sphere of human existence; the religious life of each individual belongs to one particular area of his life with its own objectives.

When I turn to consider Greek religion and the Greek gods I do not find the features that I have just described in simplified form. The Greek gods are not external to the world. They are an integral part of the cosmos. Zeus and the other Olympians created neither the physical universe nor living creatures nor mankind. They were themselves created by primordial powers that continue to exist, providing a framework and substratum for the universe. These are Chaos, Gaia, Eros, Nux, Ouranos, and Okeanos. Thus the gods whom the Greeks worship only emerged at a given point in time; they had not always existed. In relation to the original powers they are "late-comers" who seized power for themselves. Zeus established at the same time his own sovereignty and a world order never again to be brought into question. He holds

the scepter and is master and king of the universe, but he did not secure this position without difficulty or without a fight. Zeus is aware of what he owes to the allies who supported him, and what he has to fear from the enemies whom he has put into chains but who are not all totally disarmed; he knows which are the powers that he must treat with circumspection and the prerogatives that he is obliged to respect. Homer shows us Zeus backing down before the ancient *Nux*, Night, seized with reverential and religious awe.

So the gods are not eternal, merely immortal. Their immortality defines them in contrast to the poor life of men, the "ephemeral" beings who appear only to disappear, like shadows or wisps of smoke. The gods are much more consistent. Their *aion*, or inexhaustible vitality, will endure, permanently youthful, throughout time. Meanwhile, there are certain intermediate levels between gods and men. First, in between the immortals and the mortals, there are the *makrobioi* or *makraiones* whose existence covers many myriads of years, such as the *Numphai* whose destiny is linked with the cycle of life of the trees in which these deities dwell. Then, certain gods may experience a waning of their power and vitality, as did Ares, who was on the point of perishing in the jar in which two of his brothers had managed to confine him. And finally, certain men, in particular conditions, may accede to the status of the gods, and in their company live a blessed existence until the end of time.

The gods are no more all-powerful or omniscient than they are eternal. When Hades carries off her daughter into the Underworld, even as great a goddess as Demeter has to wander the world over, searching for her, begging to be told where her child has been hidden. In the end Helios, the sun, does so. It is not, strictly speaking, that Helios is omniscient, but his round eye, which is always open up there in the sky, makes him an infallible witness; his gaze of light misses nothing whatever that takes place on the surface of the earth or waters. On the other hand, Helios knows nothing of what the darkness of the future holds. Only deities of

another type, the oracular gods such as Apollo, can know the future. The power of Helios, like his knowledge, is related to the type of activity peculiar to this star. The function of the god sets a limit upon it. When he is angered all Helios can do is threaten to stop illuminating the world. If he attempted to alter the route taken by his chariot, the Erinyes would waste no time in bringing him back to the correct path.

What we find then is neither omniscience nor omnipotence but specific forms of knowledge and power between which certain oppositions may arise. The divine powers have natures sufficiently dissimilar for rivalry and conflict to exist between them. In Homer, Olympos is loud with the quarrels of the gods, in particular the arguments between Zeus and Hera. Of course, the Greeks were amused by such accounts but they knew very well that, over and above the anecdotal level, they expressed a serious truth: They saw the divine cosmos torn by tensions, contradictions, and conflicts over prerogatives and power. At the same time they were also conscious of the unity of the divine world, for all these turbulent and diverse gods are held in check by Zeus and his universal law. However, just as in the physical universe order depends upon a balance between opposed forces – the cold, the hot, the dry, and the wet – and as, in the city, peace results from agreement reached between contemporary groups, so the unity of the divine cosmos consists in a harmony between contrary powers. Although these divine powers may come into conflict and fight each other, man has no right to scorn any one of them, for each represents an authentic aspect of being, expresses one part of reality, stands for a particular type of value without which the universe would, as it were, be mutilated. Thus, when the pure Hippolytos devotes himself totally to Artemis, the virgin goddess, refusing to pay homage to Aphrodite, he is rejecting an entire aspect of the human condition. Aphrodite takes her revenge and Hippolytos meets his doom because he has refused to recognize that there is a part in each one of us that belongs to Aphrodite.

The gods are a part even of the contradictions and conflicts

in the world, and they intervene in human affairs. The Greek feels their presence within him in the form of sudden impulses, in the plans and ideas that come into his head, in the panic or frenzy that grips the warrior, in a surge of love or a feeling of shame. This presence of the gods in the entire universe, in social life and even in men's psychological life, does not mean that there are no barriers between the divine and the mortal creatures; indeed, the barriers not only exist but are, in a sense, insurmountable. The gods are a part of the same universe as men, but it is a universe with a hierarchy, a world of different levels where it is impossible to pass from one to another. To this extent the society formed by the powers of the Beyond is an extension of the hierarchical organization of human society as it appears in Homer. The gods are as close to and as separate from men as the king is in relation to his subjects. Perhaps the comparison between the society of the gods and that of men can be taken even further. When the king is the mouthpiece of justice he is not obliged to obey a written law fixed in advance. Justice is actually established by his word and action and executed through his *themis*. Does this mean that the sovereign may do as he pleases? Not at all. His royal power rests on respect for the *timai*, the prerogatives, ranks, and traditional honors that make up the hierarchical order that is inseparable from his sovereignty. Of course, the king can ignore the *time* of others, ride roughshod over the rights of the next man, overreach his *moira*, exceeding the role that is properly his. But if he does so he unleashes forces that, by upsetting the order, recoil against him and threaten his sovereignty. He calls forth a dangerous curse from the man whose *time* he has not respected, a curse that will eventually bear poisonous fruit. In the council and among the people he arouses hostility, slander, and derision – in sum, popular "jealousy" that eventually destroys royal power just as the praise and admiration of his subjects reinforce its prestige and authority. The fact is that words of blame, defiance, and scornful mockery have the effect of diminishing the king, cutting him down to size, just as glorification by his people

and by the poets increases the luster of his name and person.

One can see that faults on the part of the king bring into being powers that are, at one and the same time, religious, social, and psychological forces. Zeus' situation is very much the same as that of the king. Greek scholars have often pondered the problem of Zeus' relation to destiny as portrayed by Homer. At times Zeus appears to control destiny and it is he who decides it; at others he seems quite powerless before it and has no choice but to submit to it. This has been seen as a contradiction. But perhaps the problem has not been posed in the correct terms. The fact is that Homer does not conceive destiny as fixed once and for all, quite separate from and above Zeus and the gods as a whole; on the other hand, no more does he imagine that the gods are all-powerful, free always and everywhere to act as they please. Zeus' power is exercised subject to the same conditions as that of a king whose status is higher than that of his peers but whose rule is inseparable from a whole complex of prerogatives and honors. Thus, in the *Iliad* (XVI, 433 ff.), Zeus would like to save his son Sarpedon, who is destined, like all mortal men, to die, and is about to fall under the onslaught of the enemy. He is hesitating as to whether to intervene and alter the course of events when Hera gives him a warning. She tells him he may do as he pleases but she and the rest of the gods will not agree to support him.... If he carries Sarpedon off alive in defiance of the *moira* of human beings he should beware lest another god, in his turn, take it upon himself to do the same for his own children. Zeus heeds the warning and decides to submit rather than to spark a conflict of forces that would eventually threaten to topple not only the order of the universe but also his own supremacy.

Other expressions of this truth are extremely illuminating. In the *Iliad* (XVI, 849 ff.), a warrior on the point of giving up the ghost pronounces the following words, indicating where lies the responsibility for his death: "It is sinister destiny [*μοῖρ' ὀλοή*] that has overcome me; it is the son of Leto [i.e., Apollo]; and, among men, it is Euphorbos." To our way of thinking this may seem like

an over-abundance of explanations where one would have sufficed. But the Greek is more demanding. He knows very well that he is dying because his body has been pierced by the spear of his enemy. But after all it could have happened the other way about; the victory might have been his. The reason why it is not so is that he has had bad luck: He slipped during the fight, was blinded by the sun, or else his blow missed its mark. Such things can only be explained by the intervention of some god: Apollo must have intervened on the battlefield to settle an old score; he must have wished to avenge wrongs previously done him. But at the same time Apollo's resentment is in conformity with the law of destiny that insists that every wrong done to the gods shall be paid for and is the cause for men having been made mortal. Thus different explanations can be found for a single event according to which level of reality one has in mind. The various explanations are not mutually exclusive precisely because they do not refer to the same level.

So we can see how it is that the same religion can comprehend a deep feeling of the divine presence in almost everything that happens in human life and, at the same time, the equally strong conviction that man must manage on his own, that it is always first and foremost up to him to save himself. Like any other Greek, Odysseus believes that warrior frenzy and panic on the battlefield are directly inspired in men by the gods, but he also knows that the morale of a band of men is higher when they are fighting on a full stomach. So, against the advice of Achilles, he recommends that the soldiers should be fed and refreshed before returning to battle. There is no denying that the outcome of the war lies entirely in the hands of the gods, but the leaders should nevertheless keep a close eye on the running of it.

At the heart of Greek thought one can perhaps even discern a similar ambiguity with regard to the relationship between men and gods. Poets such as Homer and Pindar are constantly declaring that gods and men belong to two entirely separate races and that man should not seek to become the equal of the gods. "Recognize your limitations," "Be satisfied to be a man," "Know yourself": These are the maxims that express Greek wisdom. And yet, in certain circles – religious sects or schools of philosophy – we can detect a very different line of thought. Here, man is advised to develop the part of himself that is divine, to make himself as much like the gods as possible, to attempt, through purification, to accede to the immortality of the blessed, to become a god.

Two trends are also apparent in the kinds of classification of the powers of the Beyond, in the hierarchy of the society of the gods. The official religion makes clear distinctions between the various categories of supernatural powers. First, there are the *theoi*, the gods in the strictest sense of the term, with whom the *daimones* may be grouped and who occupy the dominant position in the divine world. Second, and below these, come beings who are connected with different rituals; they are known as heroes and are conceived as men who lived in former times on earth but who are now worshipped by the whole city. Finally there are those who are sometimes called the "blessed" or the "strong," that is to say the ordinary dead; they are anonymous powers who are the object of family piety in every home. Thus between the *theoi* at the top of the hierarchy and living men at the bottom of the scale there are the successive grades of the heroes and the dead. The grades remain quite separate, however; there is no communication between them. It is normally impossible for men to escape from their mortal condition. Among the philosophers, however, we find a different system of classification. For one thing the distance between men and gods is increased. The philosophers reject any anthropomorphic image of the divine. They have a purer and more rigorous conception of the divine essence. To this extent, with the philosophers the world of the gods is set further apart from men. But at the same time the *daimones* and the heroes, who have drawn closer together, constitute a class of intermediary beings whose function is precisely to mediate between the *theoi* and men, and to make it possible for the mortals to span the increased distance that separates them from the gods, allowing them to accede, step by step, to the status of hero, then of *daimon*, and then of god.

Thus, within the religious thought of the Greeks, there is as it were a tension between two poles. Sometimes it postulates a divine world that is relatively close to men, the gods making direct interventions in human affairs and existing alongside the mortals, while at the same time it conceives it to be impossible to span the gradations between man and the gods, impossible for man to escape his human condition. At other times it imagines a more clear-cut divide and a greater gap between gods and men, but on the other hand introduces the idea that men may rise to accede to the world of the gods.

Finally, this polarity is present in religion itself. On the one hand we find a civic and political religion whose essential function is to integrate the individual who accomplishes the religious rites into the social groups to which he belongs, defining him as a magistrate, a citizen, the father of a family, a host or a guest, and so on, and not to pluck him out from his social framework in order to elevate him to a higher sphere. In this religious context, piety, *eusebeia*, applies not only to the relations between men and the gods but also to all the social relations that an individual can have with his fellow citizens – his relatives, living or dead, his children, his wife, his hosts or guests, strangers, and enemies. In contrast is a religion whose function is, to some extent, the opposite, and that can be seen as complementing the state religion. This cult is addressed to gods who are not political, who have few or no temples, who lead their devotees away from the towns, into nature in the wild, and whose role is to tear individuals away from their ordinary social relationships and their usual occupations, alienating them from their own lives and from their very selves. Because women are less well integrated into the city than men and are specifically excluded from political life, this type of religion is especially associated with them. Since, as women, they are socially disqualified from participating in public affairs on an equal footing with men, from a religious point of view they are in a position to take part in cults that are, in a way, the opposite of the official religion. This "mystic" sense of religion, which

differs so much from the communally shared Greek piety in its desire for escape, its cult of madness, *mania*, and its quest for individual salvation, manifests itself in social groups that are themselves peripheral to the city and its normal institutions. *Thiasoi*, brotherhoods, and mysteries are the basis for types of grouping that lie outside the family, tribal, and civic organization. Thus, through a kind of paradox, the powers of the Beyond that men created in particular social circumstances in turn have an effect on those very social conditions and cause new types of groups and new institutions to develop.

How should we conclude an inquiry that is both so long and at the same time so summary? I hope that, in conclusion, I may simply be allowed to stress once more the complexity of a religion such as that of the Greeks. The system itself is complex, as are the relations between it and social life; and at the very heart of the religious experience there is a polarity and tension, an awareness of the contradictions that exist in man, in the universe, and in the divine world. There is no doubt that this religious concept of a world that is at once harmonious and rent by conflict should be connected with the fact that it is the Greeks who are the inventors of tragedy.

Their's is a tragic vision because the divine is ambiguous and opaque, yet at the same time it is optimistic, for man has his own tasks that he can accomplish. I believe that today we are witnessing a kind of rebirth of this sense of the tragic in life; each of us is aware of the ambiguity of the human condition. Perhaps that is why these Greek gods who, as I earlier suggested, seem to form a kind of language, continue, when we listen to them, to mean something to us.