

# “The pen fell from my hand when I was in my eighty-sixth year.”

Revisiting the work of Martin P. Nilsson

Edited by Jenny Wallensten & Gunnel Ekroth

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## ABSTRACT

2017 marked the 50th anniversary of both the death of Martin P. Nilsson, the eminent Swedish scholar of ancient Greek religion, and the publication of the third edition of his monumental *Geschichte der griechischen Religion*. Nilsson's scholarly output was huge, with a production of around 20 items annually, and he touched upon most aspects of the study of ancient Greek religion, be it in a book or an article, in a footnote or an in-depth argument. This volume constitutes a re-reading of Nilsson in the light of new ancient evidence, and modern methods and theoretical approaches.

Five leading researchers in this field of religion revisit major works of Nilsson's oeuvre—*Geschichte der griechischen Religion*, vols 1 and 2 (Jon Mikalson and Eftychia Stavrianopoulou), *Greek folk religion* (Vinciane Pirenne-Delforge), *Minoan-Mycenaean religion* (Matthew Haysom) and *Greek piety* (Michael D. Konaris)—in order to explore whether his works today are mainly touched upon with just the usual obligatory references or if they still have an active impact on contemporary discourses. Hopefully, this undertaking will stimulate others to explore the vast landscape of Nilsson's work in the future.

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## A history of changing religious attitudes in Greek antiquity

Martin P. Nilsson's *Greek piety*

### Abstract

In *Greek piety* (1948) Martin P. Nilsson put forward a concise history of religious attitudes in Greece from the Archaic age to the triumph of Christianity, distilling the conclusions he had reached about the principal religious changes and their causes after nearly half a century of studying Greek religion. My chapter examines the main themes and developments in Nilsson's portrayal of Greek religious history such as the conflicts between collective and individualistic religion and rationalism and mysticism, the alleged decline of traditional Greek religion, the increasing appeal of "Oriental" religious ideas, and finally the victory of Christianity, and how Nilsson accounted for them. Attention is given to how Nilsson attempted to explain religious changes in the ancient world by linking them to wider contemporary historical, social and cultural phenomena but also to the parallels he drew between conditions in ancient and modern times and the part played by scientific racism and anti-Eastern bias in his work.\*

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*Greek piety* may not be among Martin P. Nilsson's best-known works, but it warrants attention. In it Nilsson surveys Greek religious attitudes from the Archaic age to Late Antiquity and offers his reflections as a veteran scholar on a range of major questions: from the reasons for the decline of traditional Greek religion and the increasing religious influences from the "Orient" to pagan monotheism and the Christianization of the ancient world.

Nilsson's *Grekisk religiositet* (1946) appeared in an English translation by Herbert Jennings Rose, himself a scholar of Greek religion, and, indeed, according to Nilsson, "the foremost English scholar in the field" at the time,<sup>1</sup> under the title *Greek piety* in 1948.<sup>2</sup> In the translator's preface Rose explained that he did not translate "*religiositet*" as "religiosity" since the English word had negative connotations which the Swedish lacked.<sup>3</sup> Rose considered "The piety of Hellas" or "The piety of Greece" as alternatives for the title, though he acknowledged that these would not be accurate renderings.<sup>4</sup> Nilsson objected, maintaining they would imply that the book dealt only with the religion of Greece proper while a very large part of it, and in Nilsson's own judgement, its most significant part, examined religious attitudes during the Hellenistic and Roman times in the entire Greek-speaking world.<sup>5</sup> At Nilsson's suggestion, "Greek piety" was finally agreed upon as the title.<sup>6</sup> In the rest of the book Rose translated "*religiositet*" mostly as "religious feeling"; occasionally he used simply "religion".<sup>7</sup>

Nilsson had initially wished to dedicate *Greek piety* to Arthur Darby Nock, of whom Nilsson stated that he was "a prominent scholar who is a great friend of mine".<sup>8</sup> As, however, the Clarendon Press had a policy

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<sup>1</sup> Draft of a letter from Nilsson to the Clarendon Press, 18 May 1947; the Canadian-born H.J. Rose was then Professor of Greek at the University of Saint Andrews.

<sup>2</sup> Nilsson 1948.

<sup>3</sup> Rose 1948, v–vi. The title "Greek religiosity" had also been rejected by the Clarendon Press as "rather forbidding for English readers": Letter from D.M. Davin to Nilsson, 27 November 1946.

<sup>4</sup> Letter from H.J. Rose to Nilsson, 21 May 1947.

<sup>5</sup> Draft of a letter from Nilsson to H.J. Rose, 27 October 1947.

<sup>6</sup> Letter from H.J. Rose to Nilsson, 29 October 1947. The book appeared in German as *Griechischer Glaube* in 1950 (Nilsson 1950b) and in French as *Les croyances religieuses de la Grèce antique* in 1955 (Nilsson 1955). For further translations see Nilsson 1960a, xi.

<sup>7</sup> Rose 1948, v.

<sup>8</sup> Draft of a letter from Nilsson to the Clarendon Press, 17 September 1947. The two scholars were close friends and correspondents for many decades. In 1949 and 1951 two

of not including separate dedication pages in its publications as Nilsson wanted and as Nilsson refused to insert the dedication at the end of his preface as they suggested, the dedication to Nock did not materialize.<sup>9</sup>

In his preface Rose stated that Nilsson required “no introduction to a British or American audience”.<sup>10</sup> By the time of the publication of *Greek piety*, several books of Nilsson’s had already appeared in English<sup>11</sup> and he was widely recognized as one of the most distinguished living scholars of Greek religion. Over 70 years old when he wrote *Greek piety*, Nilsson mentioned in his own preface that in the book he would distil the general conclusions he had reached concerning Greek religion after having “devoted a large part of his long life” to its study.<sup>12</sup> Intended for the general public, *Greek piety* lacked footnotes and did not enter into detailed, technical discussions, for which Nilsson referred the reader to his *Geschichte der griechischen Religion*.<sup>13</sup> Nilsson clarified that in *Greek piety* he would not be concerned with the religion of the major writers or philosophers of Greece or with the Greek gods and their cult<sup>14</sup> as scholars such as Lewis Campbell, author of *Religion in Greek literature* (1898), James Adam, author of *The religious teachers of Greece* (1908), or Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff in *Der Glaube der Hellenen* (1931–1932) had done.<sup>15</sup> Rather, his goal was “to set forth the religious attitude towards the world and the religious view of the life of man, *as these changed with the times* [my emphasis]”.<sup>16</sup> In the ‘Conclusion’ of *Greek piety* Nilsson reiterated “times change and we change with them; so does religion. Religion must, if it is to satisfy the spiritual needs of humanity, correspond to the age’s

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letters from Nilsson to A.D. Nock appeared in *HTR* respectively on ‘Some fundamental concepts in the science of religion’ and ‘The positive gains in the science of Greek religion’: Nilsson 1949; 1951a. On the letters see Gagné 2019, 74–75.

<sup>9</sup> Letter from D.M. Davin to Nilsson, 19 September 1947; draft of a reply letter by Nilsson, 29 September 1947.

<sup>10</sup> Rose 1948, v.

<sup>11</sup> Including *Greek popular religion* (Nilsson 1940) and *The Minoan-Mycenaean religion and its survival in Greek religion* (Nilsson 1927) discussed by V. Pirenne-Delforge and M. Haysom respectively in this volume.

<sup>12</sup> Nilsson 1948, vii. Cf. Nilsson 1951a, 143.

<sup>13</sup> Nilsson 1948, vii.

<sup>14</sup> Nilsson 1948, vii; Svenbro 2020, 6. On Nilsson’s shifting of attention away from the religion of poets and philosophers, see the chapters of J. Mikalson and V. Pirenne-Delforge in this volume.

<sup>15</sup> Campbell 1898; Adam 1908; von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff 1931–1932.

<sup>16</sup> Nilsson 1948, vii. Cf. Nilsson 1948, 19: “our principal object [is] a description of religious feeling in Greece.”

views of life and the world”.<sup>17</sup> Nilsson’s stress on religious change over time constitutes one of the principal characteristics of his approach to Greek religion and contrasts with the perspective of another major contemporary student of Greek religion, Walter Friedrich Otto.<sup>18</sup>

Nilsson’s examination of religious attitudes in *Greek piety* complements his studies of ritual practices and the gods in other works of his such as in *Geschichte der griechischen Religion*. It should be noted that part of the account of Greek religion in Alfred Gercke’s and Eduard Norden’s *Einleitung in die klassische Altertumswissenschaft* (1933) was devoted to the subject of *Religiosität*.<sup>19</sup> The author of the original chapter was Sam Wide, Nilsson’s former teacher at Lund University, but the text was reworked by Nilsson. In the course of the chapter we will point to some similarities with *Greek piety*.

In *Greek piety*’s brief introduction Nilsson sketched the general characteristics “of the older, national Greek religion in its most universal form” from the way the gods were represented in epic poetry to Greek temples, sacrificial rituals and domestic worship.<sup>20</sup> Of particular interest is Nilsson’s emphasis on the communal character of Greek religion. He underlined that “Greek religion was indissolubly connected with the community and its component parts, State, clan, and family.”<sup>21</sup> In such a religion, the individual experienced piety as long as he recognized that he was “a link in the chain of the clan, a citizen of his State.”<sup>22</sup> Nilsson suggested that one could speak of “collective piety” in ancient Greece comparable to that of the rural communities of old Sweden.<sup>23</sup> The notion that

<sup>17</sup> Nilsson 1948, 196.

<sup>18</sup> Nilsson 1949, 72–73. On Nilsson’s focus on religious change, see J. Mikalson’s chapter in this volume. On the contrasting approaches of Nilsson and W.F. Otto see Gagné 2019, 75–80.

<sup>19</sup> Wide & Nilsson 1933, 24–49. The author noted the dearth of comprehensive studies on the subject of “*Griechische Religiosität*”, but observed that scholars such as U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, A.B. Drachmann and P. Wendland had illuminated various aspects of it: Wide & Nilsson 1933, 57. As its title suggests, W. Nestle’s partly contemporaneous, three-volume *Die griechische Religiosität in ihren Grundzügen und Hauptvertretern von Homer bis Proklos* (1930–1934) was more concerned with major writers and thinkers.

<sup>20</sup> Nilsson 1948, 18–19.

<sup>21</sup> Nilsson 1948, 7. Cf. Nestle 1930 58.

<sup>22</sup> Nilsson 1948, 8. For the place of individual or personal religion in what we would now call “*polis*” religion rather than “state” religion in current scholarship, see Parker 2011, 57–61, 246–250; Kindt 2012, 12–35.

<sup>23</sup> Nilsson 1948, 7.



there were analogies between the religious ways of the Greeks and the countryfolk of his native land recurs in Nilsson's writings on Greek religion, giving rise to a sense of kinship between ancient Greece and Sweden.<sup>24</sup> Nilsson underlined that in the course of time different forms of individualistic religion made their appearance in Greece. As we will see, the tension between them and the official, collective religion of Greek city-states is a major theme in *Greek piety*.

It is further worth observing that in his discussion of Greek cultic practices Nilsson took issue with the view that rituals constituted solely external, formal acts.<sup>25</sup> He acknowledged that rituals could turn into "mere matters of external routine"; nevertheless, he maintained that "piety and devotion to the gods also found their expression in them."<sup>26</sup> In making this point, Nilsson was leaning in the direction of scholars such as Wide and Paul Stengel who objected to a tendency in late 19th- and early 20th-century scholarship to separate rituals from belief.<sup>27</sup>

After outlining the principal features of Greek religion in the introduction, Nilsson proceeded to the main topic of his book, as we mentioned, "a description of religious feeling in Greece",<sup>28</sup> which he set out in three chapters.

## 1. The Archaic age

### MYSTICISM AND LEGALISM

Nilsson devoted the first chapter of *Greek piety* to Greek religion of the Archaic period. As seen, Nilsson underscored that the official religion of Greek states promoted collective piety and that it conversely offered little scope for the satisfaction of the religious needs of the individual.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Svenbro 2020, 10, 13. In mentioning his interest in Swedish folklore Nilsson explicitly stated in a brief biographical note that he sought to draw connections between antiquity and modern times: Nilsson 1960a, x.

<sup>25</sup> Nilsson 1948, 10.

<sup>26</sup> Nilsson 1948, 10, 19. Cf. Nilsson 1960b.

<sup>27</sup> "*Der Kultus doch im religiösen Glauben wurzelt*": Wide & Nilsson 1933, 57. Cf. Stengel 1898, 3. W.R. Smith had dissociated the rituals of the religions of antiquity from belief in the Christian sense: Smith 1889, 18–19. For the history of the debate and current views, see Parker 2011, 30–34; Versnel 2011, 539–559; Harrison 2015, 21–28.

<sup>28</sup> Nilsson 1948, 19.

<sup>29</sup> Nilsson 1948, 20.

Moreover, as its stress was on the distance separating gods and mortals, it had no place for mysticism which aimed at unification with the divine.<sup>30</sup> According to Nilsson, as a reaction to these limitations, at the very beginning of the historical period, powerful mystical movements became influential in Greece, belying conventional, classicizing views of Greek culture.<sup>31</sup> As he stated, “in the centuries preceding the Persian War, Greece presented a picture very unlike our usual conceptions of the Hellenic world. Maenads in their ecstasy raged in the woods, and fields, Orphics preached that man’s sinful nature must be subdued and purified by mortifications to avoid punishment in the other world. The land was full of prophets, wandering seers, collectors of oracles”.<sup>32</sup>

In contrast to the official religion of the Greek *poleis*, mystical trends such as the cult of Dionysos or Orphism were addressed to the individual and were not confined by state borders.<sup>33</sup> Their spread throughout the Greek world was infectious. Recalling Erwin Rohde’s famous description of the propagation of Dionysiac worship in *Psyche* (1894),<sup>34</sup> Nilsson compared it to the dancing frenzies of the Middle Ages.<sup>35</sup> Powerful as they were, however, these trends encountered the opposition of another movement that was strong enough to contain them.<sup>36</sup> This was what Nilsson called “legalism”, which he defined as “the attempt to win the grace and favour of the gods by fulfilling their commandments.”<sup>37</sup> In *Greek popular religion* (1940) Nilsson observed that whereas mysticism had been drawing the attention of scholars of Greek religion,<sup>38</sup> legalism tended to be neglected, in a reversal from earlier periods in the history of scholarship when mystical elements were downplayed.<sup>39</sup> Nilsson maintained

<sup>30</sup> Nilsson 1948, 20. Cf. Wide & Nilsson 1933, 25: “die altgriechische Frömmigkeit [sucht] den Unterschied zwischen Göttern und Menschen ... hervorzuheben.”

<sup>31</sup> Nilsson 1948, 21.

<sup>32</sup> Nilsson 1948, 29–30.

<sup>33</sup> Nilsson 1948, 29–30.

<sup>34</sup> Rohde 1894, 330–331.

<sup>35</sup> Nilsson 1948, 22.

<sup>36</sup> Nilsson 1948, 22, 186.

<sup>37</sup> Nilsson 1948, 30–31. Cf. Nilsson 1940, 103; 1941, 592. On Nilsson’s account of legalism and mysticism in *Geschichte der griechischen Religion*, see J. Mikalson’s chapter in this volume.

<sup>38</sup> Nilsson 1940, 103–104. In this context, Nilsson mentioned E. Rohde’s “admirable and much read” *Psyche* (1890–1894). On Rohde see Cancik 1990. On the rising interest in “irrational” aspects of Greek religion over the course of the first half of the 20th century see Gagné 2019.

<sup>39</sup> Konaris 2016, 149–150.

that if the need for union with the gods led to mysticism, legalism was the outcome of the need for peace with them.<sup>40</sup> It was founded on “the desire for justice, for rendering unto the gods what was the gods.”<sup>41</sup>

According to Nilsson, the foremost example of legalism in Archaic Greece was Hesiod’s *Works and days* with the rules it prescribed for human conduct.<sup>42</sup> In *Greek popular religion* Nilsson stated that one could find in it “expressions of piety pervading the life of man such as is seldom found among the Greeks.”<sup>43</sup> Nilsson remarked that in contrast to the Persians or the Jews in whose religions the legalistic tendency reached extremes, the Greeks, owing to their “sound good sense”, refrained from pushing legalism to its limits.<sup>44</sup> If “soundness” was one of the stereotypical qualities ascribed in contemporary Classical scholarship to the Greeks, who were regarded as the intellectual ancestors of the modern Europeans, excess to the point of morbidity was typically associated with Eastern religions and cultures, reflecting the prevalent Orientalizing attitudes of the period.

The Delphic oracle may not have been the fountainhead of legalism, but Nilsson stressed that it espoused and promoted it.<sup>45</sup> Under the auspices of Apollo, legalism was a force for peace, order, and law in an age of great turmoil.<sup>46</sup> It succeeded in defusing the subversive cult of Dionysos by accommodating it within the norms of Greek religion: “Apollo did not attempt the hopeless enterprise of suppressing ecstasy; he took it into his service, regularized it, and thus deprived it of its dangerous offshoots.”<sup>47</sup> Thanks to the wise stance of Delphi, the breakdown of social and religious order was prevented.<sup>48</sup> However, Nilsson did not embark on an unqualified eulogy of the role of Apollo and the Delphic oracle in the manner of Classical scholars of the previous generation like Ernst Curtius.<sup>49</sup> “Apollo”, he maintained, “turned this movement [legalism] to account, but never understood its profundity nor its extent, and could

<sup>40</sup> Nilsson 1948, 30.

<sup>41</sup> Nilsson 1948, 33.

<sup>42</sup> Nilsson 1948, 31–35.

<sup>43</sup> Nilsson 1940, 104.

<sup>44</sup> Nilsson 1948, 31. Cf. Nilsson 1940, 107: “the Greeks were too sensible to push legalism to the bitter end.”

<sup>45</sup> Nilsson 1948, 51.

<sup>46</sup> Nilsson 1948, 45.

<sup>47</sup> Nilsson 1948, 41.

<sup>48</sup> Nilsson 1948, 51.

<sup>49</sup> Christ 1989, 77; Konaris 2016, 176.

not understand it, because he was an Olympian.”<sup>50</sup> According to Nilsson, Apollo could not and did not provide an answer to a crucial question the Greeks eventually came to ask—how was the gods’ treatment of mortals justified.<sup>51</sup> This criticism of Pythian Apollo recurs in other writings of Nilsson. In his *A history of Greek religion* (1925), for example, he stated that Apollo “did not understand the profundity of Hesiod’s demand for justice: his was the external ritualism.”<sup>52</sup> Nilsson suggested that as he was himself part of the Olympian order, the god at Delphi was incapable of religious reform—his constant advice was to uphold the *πάτρια* and *νόμιμα*.<sup>53</sup> Although drawing on ancient Greek criticisms of the gods, Nilsson’s comments about the religious shortcomings of Apollo and the Olympians were strengthened by his own assumptions about the nature of religion. Nilsson’s criticism of the Olympian gods, however, paled in comparison to the attacks launched against them by Jane Harrison in the early 20th century,<sup>54</sup> which notably caused Gilbert Murray to come to their defence: “she [Harrison] has by now made the title of ‘Olympian’ almost a term of reproach, and thrown down so many a scornful challenge to the canonical gods of Greece, that I have ventured on this attempt to explain their historical origin and plead for their religious value.”<sup>55</sup>

## 2. Dissolution

### THE LIMITATIONS OF PATRIOTIC RELIGION AND THE RELIGIOUS CRISIS OF THE 4TH CENTURY BC

In the second chapter, which bears the title ‘Dissolution’, Nilsson turned to developments during the Classical and early Hellenistic periods.<sup>56</sup> He maintained that the successful outcome of the war against the Per-

<sup>50</sup> Nilsson 1948, 52.

<sup>51</sup> Nilsson 1948, 52. Cf. Nilsson 1948, 186: “but Apollo was one of the Olympians ... and did not understand the profundity of the demand for justice.”

<sup>52</sup> Nilsson 1925, 197.

<sup>53</sup> Nilsson 1925, 197, 200. Cf. Nilsson 1941, 618.

<sup>54</sup> Harrison 1903, 364; 1912, vii–viii.

<sup>55</sup> Murray 1925, 8. If G. Murray attempted to defend the Olympians gods from J. Harrison’s criticism, the scholar most appreciative of them was W.F. Otto, see Burkert 1985, 4; Konaris 2016, 274–275.

<sup>56</sup> For Nilsson’s treatment of the Hellenistic and post-Hellenistic periods in *Geschichte der griechischen Religion*, see E. Stavrianopoulou’s chapter in this volume.

sian Empire gave rise to feelings of national elation and self-confidence in Greece which found their reflection in religion. The wave of mysticism retreated. Citing from his *A history of Greek religion* Nilsson had earlier stated, “the age took another direction; the demand of the Greek mind for clarity and plastic beauty carried the day. In the clear and rarefied atmosphere of the period of great national exaltation which followed the victory over the Persians the mists and the figures of clouds were dissipated.”<sup>57</sup> Orphism, the most radical of the mystical religious movements of the Archaic age, “sank to the level of the populace.”<sup>58</sup> In his ‘Early Orphism and kindred religious movements’ Nilsson said of his teacher, Wilamowitz, that, as he was “intent on the clarity and the higher spiritual and literary forms of Greek religion [he had] little esteem for these nebulous and superstitious movements which appealed more to unlettered people than to higher minds.”<sup>59</sup> As will be seen, an emphasis on Greek clarity and rationalism and a suspicion of mystical tendencies in conformity with the values of contemporary mainstream Protestantism is also discernible in the work of Nilsson.<sup>60</sup> In this respect there is a stark contrast with the writings of scholars like Harrison who in her (later) work came to celebrate mysticism.<sup>61</sup>

As the victory in the Persian Wars was attributed to the gods of the official religion of the Greek cities, in the period that followed the link between state and religion became closer than ever. In a section on ‘Patriotic religion’, indebted to Wide, Nilsson spoke of the development of patriotic religious feelings especially in Athens.<sup>62</sup> Nilsson stressed that the intertwinement of religion with patriotism had major negative consequences: patriotism “robbed religion of its proper and indwelling value.”<sup>63</sup> In the collective, patriotic worship that prevailed individual piety had virtually

<sup>57</sup> Nilsson 1948, 28.

<sup>58</sup> Nilsson 1948, 23, 28. Cf. Wide & Nilsson 1933, 28. On Nilsson’s view of Orphism see Gagné 2019, 83.

<sup>59</sup> Nilsson 1952a, 632.

<sup>60</sup> On Nilsson’s view of rationalism as the hallmark of the Greek spirit, see V. Pirenne-Delforge’s chapter in this volume.

<sup>61</sup> Harrison 1903, 658–659; Robinson 2002, 220–221.

<sup>62</sup> Nilsson 1948, 66–70. Cf. “The state and the gods were a unity”; “religious feeling gave way to feelings of patriotism”: Nilsson 1940, 86–87. The emergence of “*patriotische Religiosität*” in 5th-century BC Athens was also discussed in Wide & Nilsson 1933, 31–32. We may compare G. Murray’s view (1925, 98) that “the real religion of the fifth century was ... a devotion to the City itself.”

<sup>63</sup> Nilsson 1948, 69.

no place.<sup>64</sup> People became more devoted to the lesser gods and to heroes rather than to the major state gods whom they regarded as too remote.<sup>65</sup>

Moreover, the last decades of the 5th century BC saw a resurgence of the forces of individualism which had been suppressed at the beginning of the Classical period. As the Greek Enlightenment set in, the gods of state religion were subjected to the criticism of sophists and philosophers. The attacks of these “secular” thinkers were so devastating that the gods of traditional religion would continue “to exist only in public policy and in the minds of the simple and the credulous”.<sup>66</sup> Among the educated, belief started to dissipate. “Good Athenians”, Nilsson asserted, “believed that they believed in their gods, but the belief was beginning to fade.”<sup>67</sup> Such measures as the trials of subversive thinkers proved ineffective. According to Nilsson, during the course of the 4th century BC Greek religion faced the first truly major crisis of its history which brought about the dissolution of the “old religious sentiment”.<sup>68</sup> Although cult continued to be practised following traditional norms, Nilsson contended that “religious feeling never was lower than when the Hellenistic period began.”<sup>69</sup> Belief in the traditional gods yielded to belief in Tyche, which represented “the last stage in the secularizing of religion in its conception of the powers which govern the universe and the destinies of man.”<sup>70</sup> The educated segments of society turned to philosophy which during the Hellenistic period “took the place of religion as the comforter and guide of humanity”.<sup>71</sup> However, philosophical doctrines were too abstract for the vast majority of the population.<sup>72</sup> For them there remained “cult and the lower forms of religion, supplemented by superstition”.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Nilsson 1948, 69. Cf. religion turned into an “apanage of patriotism”: *ibid.*, 69.

<sup>65</sup> Nilsson 1948, 68.

<sup>66</sup> Nilsson 1948, 70, 78. Cf. “The criticism of the gods’ arbitrary conduct and their offences against justice and morality had done its work.”: *ibid.*, 78.

<sup>67</sup> Nilsson 1948, 77, a repetition of Nilsson 1940, 94.

<sup>68</sup> Nilsson 1948, 84.

<sup>69</sup> Nilsson 1948, 91.

<sup>70</sup> Nilsson 1948, 86.

<sup>71</sup> Nilsson 1948, 87. Cf. “Philosophers took over the cure of souls.”: *ibid.*, 87. In his *Conversion* A.D. Nock (1933, 167) suggested that one of the major reasons why the various philosophical schools assumed a prominent place in the spiritual history of Hellenistic and Roman times was that in periods of turmoil they “offered a life with a scheme”. W. Nestle (1934, 86) also discussed “*Philosophie als Ersatz der Religion*”.

<sup>72</sup> Nilsson 1948, 88.

<sup>73</sup> Nilsson 1948, 91.

### 3. Rebuilding

In the third and final chapter, titled ‘Rebuilding’, Nilsson considered the religious history of the Greek world from the latter part of Hellenistic times to the end of antiquity. The period saw, he maintained, the further disintegration of traditional Greek religion and the appearance of new conditions and elements on which Christianity would eventually build. Both in the eyes of Nilsson and the translator, Rose, as well as of reviewers such as André-Jean Festugière and William Keith Chambers Guthrie, this was the book’s most interesting and important part.<sup>74</sup>

#### A. THE COLLAPSE OF THE OLD

##### The “Orientalization” of Greek culture

According to Nilsson, as time went by, the inadequacy of the old religion of Greece and its gods in the context of the new, vastly enlarged world of the Hellenistic kingdoms became more and more apparent. In his view, during the Hellenistic period there occurred a new and this time fatal religious crisis. It began *c.* 200 BC and only ended with the victory of Christianity.<sup>75</sup> Nilsson’s friend and correspondent Nock produced in 1933 a study of the phenomenon of conversion in the Hellenistic and Roman period that would become a classic.<sup>76</sup> In *Greek piety* Nilsson emphasized that entire societies, like individuals, can be converted.<sup>77</sup> He suggested that such a collective conversion of Greek society started to take place in the middle of the Hellenistic age. It intensified in Roman times “until it was perfected in the victory of Christianity and the passing of the ancient culture into the Middle Ages.”<sup>78</sup> In the ‘Conclusion’ of *Greek piety* Nilsson described it as “a conversion from rationalism to mysticism, from the clear, logical lines of Greek thought to faith in the wonderful, supernatural, and supersensuous, from love of the beauty of the world and the body to flight from the world and condemnation of all that was corporeal, from sensual desire to asceticism ... It was a conversion from

<sup>74</sup> Nilsson 1948, v; Festugière 1948, 507; Guthrie 1949, 134.

<sup>75</sup> Nilsson 1948, 92.

<sup>76</sup> Nock 1933.

<sup>77</sup> Nilsson 1948, 139, 187. Cf. Nilsson 1950a, 682.

<sup>78</sup> Nilsson 1948, 188.

social or collective piety to individual religion”.<sup>79</sup> We may compare Murray’s account of the features distinguishing the Christian from the Classical era in *The five stages of Greek religion* (1925) which Nilsson quoted in another context in *Greek piety*. They consisted in “a rise of asceticism, of mysticism, in a sense, of pessimism; a loss of self-confidence, of hope in this life and of faith in normal human effort; a despair of patient enquiry, a cry for infallible revelation; an indifference to the welfare of the state, a conversion of the soul to God.”<sup>80</sup> Like Murray’s, Nilsson’s portrayal of the conversion that ancient society underwent may appear as an homage to an idealized vision of Classical Greek culture, deploring its replacement by Christianity. However, as will be seen, for Nilsson, by the time of the rise of Christianity Greek religion had already undergone such transformations that the former’s victory appeared salubrious.

The crucial question confronting the student of Greek religion and of Greek culture in general was how such a radical conversion of Greek society could have occurred. According to Nilsson, the usual explanation was that “Greece was strangled in the grip of the East”.<sup>81</sup> Nilsson agreed that “the Eastern mentality triumphed over the Hellenic.”<sup>82</sup> This, however, begged the further question of what made the triumph of the East possible. Nilsson pointed out that when exposed to strong Oriental influences in the Archaic period, the Greeks had managed to remould them in the spirit of their own culture. Why they were unable to do so in Late Antiquity was an issue that greatly preoccupied him.<sup>83</sup>

As we saw, Nilsson placed the start of the conversion “in the middle of the Hellenistic period, about 200 BC”.<sup>84</sup> By that time, the traditional religion of Greece had for long been undermined. Moreover, the exter-

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<sup>79</sup> Nilsson 1948, 188. In the second volume of *Geschichte der griechischen Religion* Nilsson (1950a, 682) likewise stated: “*Es gibt aber auch ein Bekehrung der Menschheit, und eine solche fand in der Kaiserzeit statt, eine Bekehrung vom griechischen Rationalismus zur mystischen und okkultistischen Gläubigkeit.*”

<sup>80</sup> Murray 1925, 155.

<sup>81</sup> Nilsson 1948, 189.

<sup>82</sup> Nilsson 1948, 189–190, 294. In other writings of his, both before and after *Greek piety*, Nilsson reiterated that Greece was altered in its core, but rejected the idea that it “suffocated in the embrace of the Orient”, see Nilsson 1943, 275. Cf. Nilsson 1950a, 294. On the broader debate on “Oriental” influences on Greek religion in the scholarship of the period, see E. Stavrianopoulou’s chapter in this volume.

<sup>83</sup> Nilsson 1948, 138: “Why was the Greek world orientalised, especially in its religious aspect?” Cf. Nilsson 1950a, 682.

<sup>84</sup> Nilsson 1948, 140.



nal and internal decline of the Hellenistic kingdoms had started to be evident. In such conditions, the forces of mysticism and occultism found fertile ground to rise again. They manifested themselves in the mystery cults and later in Hermetism, Gnosticism and the theurgy of the Neoplatonists.<sup>85</sup> Nilsson maintained that to better comprehend the religious experience of Late Antiquity, it was helpful to compare it to other historical periods, including his own.<sup>86</sup> Thus calling attention to the popularity of occultist writers like Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky in the late 19th century, he argued that “spiritism and theosophy have grown up in our times from the same soil.”<sup>87</sup> Profiting from the weakening of established religion, they tapped into longings which may have been dormant in periods when rationalism prevailed, but had not been extinguished.<sup>88</sup> Nilsson emphasized that a fascination with “Oriental” lore was visible in both cases: in Late Antiquity Greco-Roman pagans turned with awe to the teachings of Eastern sages; the modern European occultist movement was inspired by yoga and the Mahatmas.<sup>89</sup> However, whereas in modern times the progress of science managed to keep such tendencies within limits, in Late Antiquity genuine science had become extinct.<sup>90</sup> Nilsson laid great stress on the decline or “bankruptcy” of Greek science. He argued that ancient science had a fundamental flaw: it relied on observation rather than experiment which provided the basis of modern scientific research.<sup>91</sup> Furthermore, in time, Greek science started to appeal to divine revelation instead of logical argumentation. As a result, by Late Antiquity, there had ceased to be a difference between religion and science.<sup>92</sup> While the once-triumphant Greek rationalism “wasted away as a fire burns itself out for lack of fuel”, religious belief was strengthened again.<sup>93</sup>

To illustrate the “feeling of weariness” that engulfed the educated layers of ancient society Nilsson quoted extensively at the ‘Conclusion’ of *Greek piety* “from the ingenious work of Gilbert Murray, Fives stages of

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<sup>85</sup> Nilsson 1948, 140–142.

<sup>86</sup> Nilsson 1948, 141.

<sup>87</sup> Nilsson 1948, 141, 145. Cf. Nilsson 1950a, 684–685.

<sup>88</sup> Nilsson 1948, 142.

<sup>89</sup> Nilsson 1948, 142, 149.

<sup>90</sup> Nilsson 1948, 149. We are reminded of another major 20th-century scholar of Greek religion who displayed great interest in ancient and modern manifestations of irrationalism and their clash with rationalism, E.R. Dodds. On Dodds see Stray *et al.* 2019.

<sup>91</sup> Nilsson 1948, 139.

<sup>92</sup> Nilsson 1948, 139, 141.

<sup>93</sup> Nilsson 1948, 140.

Greek religion”.<sup>94</sup> Nilsson quoted, in particular, the part in which Murray described the pervasive sense of failure in the Hellenistic age which made the Greeks gradually retreat from society and this world and place their hopes in personal salvation in the afterlife; and, further, his account of the failure of nerve in Late Antiquity.<sup>95</sup> Nilsson added that he quoted Murray “with a certain reservation, for that celebrated scholar’s standpoint is much the same as that of men of to-day.”<sup>96</sup> One may ask how immune Nilsson himself was from the same observation, especially given that he was inclined to draw parallels between ancient and modern times. Murray was the most prominent liberal classicist of his times.<sup>97</sup> In the context of discussing paganism in relation to Christianity in the *Five stages of Greek religion* he professed that “to me all these overpowering optimismisms which, by means of a few untested a priori postulates, affect triumphantly to disprove the most obvious facts of life, seem very soon to become meaningless.”<sup>98</sup> Moreover, the progressive inward-turning of religious attitudes which Murray regarded as characterizing Late Antiquity undermined the individual’s interest in, and responsibility towards, society in a manner that appeared to cause his regret. Although Nilsson largely shared Murray’s opinions on the differences between Classical and post-Classical religious attitudes, his approach was informed by conservative rather than liberal views.<sup>99</sup> Furthermore, as we shall see, he did not treat paganism and Christianity in the manner of Murray’s detached even-handedness, but argued for Christianity’s superiority.

### Men with “non-Hellenic blood”

The notion of a “failure of nerve” explained in part why the Greeks became more susceptible to the adoption of foreign ideas—they found reassurance in the authority of the age-old wisdom of the East. While the Greeks had always admired “Oriental” wisdom, according to Nilsson, in Late Antiquity their admiration became fatal.<sup>100</sup> When he came to the ‘Conclusion’ of *Greek piety*, Nilsson attempted to explain further

<sup>94</sup> Nilsson 1948, 188.

<sup>95</sup> Nilsson 1948, 188–189.

<sup>96</sup> Nilsson 1948, 188. On G. Murray as a student of Greek religion, see Parker 2007, 81–102.

<sup>97</sup> Stray 2007.

<sup>98</sup> Murray 1925, 231–232.

<sup>99</sup> Cf. Dürkop 2013, 161.

<sup>100</sup> Nilsson 1948, 141.

why “the overlordship of the Greek spirit was broken”, as he had put it earlier.<sup>101</sup> We should take particular note of his line of argument. Nilsson emphasized that most of the great cultural and intellectual centres of the Hellenistic world were not located in Greece, but abroad—in places where Greeks and non-Greeks mixed both in blood and spirit.<sup>102</sup> Nilsson further stressed that several of the most influential figures of the major philosophical schools such as Stoicism or Neoplatonism during the Hellenistic and Roman times did not hail from Greece proper and were either foreigners or at best half-Greek.<sup>103</sup> He maintained that, “these men, with non-Hellenic blood in their veins, born and bred in the traditions and intellectual atmosphere of their own countries, brought with them, however unconsciously, the decisive foundations for their thinking, which they disguised in Greek forms.”<sup>104</sup> As we see, Nilsson did not confine himself to calling attention to their foreign cultural background, but also referred to their foreign blood. We may compare how in the second volume of *Geschichte der griechischen Religion* he likewise highlighted the point that the most important representatives of Greek culture in the Roman period came from Asia Minor, commenting that they would not have been of pure Greek blood.<sup>105</sup> To return to *Greek piety*, Nilsson underscored that by the beginning of the Roman period, Greece was “wasted and bled white, impoverished and depopulated.”<sup>106</sup> In such conditions, he argued, Greece was in no position to repel what he called a foreign invasion of Greek culture.<sup>107</sup> Nilsson suggested that foreign ideas managed to strike deep roots “owing to the thinning out and enfeeblement of the Greek element in the population.”<sup>108</sup> He went on to add that, according to Herodotos, the clash between the East and the West was a major theme in human history. In a clear warning to his contemporaries, Nilsson reminded his readers that in the Trojan War, the first episode of that clash, the city of Troy fell only after the besiegers

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<sup>101</sup> Nilsson 1948, 28.

<sup>102</sup> Nilsson 1948, 190.

<sup>103</sup> Nilsson 1948, 190–191.

<sup>104</sup> Nilsson 1948, 191.

<sup>105</sup> Nilsson 1950a, 693. Similar comments about the non-Hellenic blood especially of the leading Stoic philosophers were being made in the 1930s by pro-Nazi historians like F. Schachermeyr, a major advocate of race-biological approaches to ancient history, see Chapoutot 2016, 208–210.

<sup>106</sup> Nilsson 1948, 191.

<sup>107</sup> Nilsson 1948, 190–191.

<sup>108</sup> Nilsson 1948, 191.

penetrated it by stealth and opened its gates.<sup>109</sup> We may draw a further comparison with *Geschichte der griechischen Religion* in which Nilsson stated that history taught that smaller groups of conquering peoples were bound to mix and be absorbed by larger subject populations. This, he maintained, was what happened to the Greeks from the Hellenistic age onwards: the mixing of the blood and with it the beginning of absorption was unavoidable.<sup>110</sup> It should also be observed in this context that, although in *Geschichte der griechischen Religion* Nilsson laid stress on social rather than biological factors to account for cultural and religious change, he also contended that the peasant-folk of Greece, whose blood, he stated, was purely Greek, clung tenaciously to aspects of traditional Greek religion such as the belief in inferior deities and Hades.<sup>111</sup> We should note that the portrayal of the Hellenistic period as a period of catastrophic race blending responsible for the downfall of ancient Greek civilization had been particularly popular with, but was not exclusive to, pro-Nazi historians,<sup>112</sup> a point to which we shall return. The views that Nilsson articulated should be seen in the light of the anxiety over the dangers of immigration in contemporary Sweden and of fears that Western European nations would be eclipsed by numerically superior populations<sup>113</sup> and illustrate the enduring influences from what Jesper Svenbro has called “genetic determinism”<sup>114</sup> and scientific racism, which are more commonly associated with some of Nilsson’s earlier work.

Lund University was a major international centre for the study of genetics in the early 20th century, and in the 1920s race biology was laying claim to legitimate scientific status in Sweden as elsewhere.<sup>115</sup> Nilsson was a member of the Mendelian Society of Lund and a close friend of Herman Nilsson-Ehle, a world-renowned plant breeder and geneticist and an advocate of race biology, whose ideas influenced Nilsson.<sup>116</sup> In 1921 Nilsson published an article with the revealing title, ‘The race problem

<sup>109</sup> Nilsson 1948, 191–192.

<sup>110</sup> Nilsson 1950a, 26.

<sup>111</sup> Nilsson 1950a, 693.

<sup>112</sup> Chapoutot 2016, 208–210, 290, 347; Gagné 2019, 51. As noted, there were similarities in the arguments advanced by Nilsson and F. Schachermeyr regarding the foreign blood of Hellenistic philosophers.

<sup>113</sup> Dürkop 2013, 163.

<sup>114</sup> Svenbro 2007, 274.

<sup>115</sup> Höglund & Bengtsson 2014, 113; Saura 2020, 6.

<sup>116</sup> Svenbro 2007, 279–282; Bengtsson 2014, 134; Höglund & Bengtsson 2014, 111–112.

of the Roman Empire', in *Hereditas*.<sup>117</sup> *Hereditas* was a publication of the Mendelian Society in Lund, and Nilsson-Ehle as well as Herman Lundborg, the foremost proponent of race biology in Sweden at that time, were members of its editorial board.<sup>118</sup> In the article Nilsson rejected a Darwinian explanation of the decline of Roman Empire in favour of a biological one and subscribed to the tenets of the scientific racism of the period.<sup>119</sup> He claimed that there "were great innate differences between the races of humanity" and that there were "races of more and lesser value".<sup>120</sup> Mixing between unequal races beyond a certain point caused the deterioration of the better race, destroying "the unity and harmony of the race and the individual".<sup>121</sup> This was what led to the downfall of the Roman Empire. The birth rates of the Romans were not sufficiently high to assimilate the foreign peoples of the provinces. Instead all the races of the empire mixed together and "unlimited bastardizing" ensued, resulting into "the mingling of better and worse races into a motley and indefinite mass without firm mental or moral characteristics."<sup>122</sup> This, argued Nilsson, was "a sufficient explanation of the decline and fall of ... the Roman Empire",<sup>123</sup> which he characterized as the "greatest tragedy of history",<sup>124</sup> and which again was clearly intended to serve as a warning for the threat posed to the nations of Modern Europe by race mixing and "bastardizing". In this context, it should be emphasized that in another egregious example of scientific racism in the same article Nilsson defended "the aversion to mixed marriages, e.g. to marriages between Europeans and negroes ... [as] just from a genetic point of view."<sup>125</sup>

At the end of the article, Nilsson maintained that under certain conditions the blending of races and "bastardizing" could, however, also have positive results as they could lead to the creation of a new race.<sup>126</sup> The conditions were that the "bastardizing" should stop and that the

<sup>117</sup> Nilsson 1921.

<sup>118</sup> Höglund & Bengtsson 2014, 110–114; Saura 2014, 119.

<sup>119</sup> Nilsson 1921, 370–371. On this article see McGinty 1978, 229, n. 74; Svenbro 2007, 269–272; Bengtsson 2014; Saura 2014. On Nilsson's interest in genetics see further Dürkop 2013, 159–163.

<sup>120</sup> Nilsson 1921, 370, 385.

<sup>121</sup> Nilsson 1921, 386; Bengtsson 2014, 135.

<sup>122</sup> Nilsson 1921, 385, 387.

<sup>123</sup> Nilsson 1921, 387; McGinty 1978, 229, n. 74; Bengtsson 2014, 135.

<sup>124</sup> Nilsson 1921, 370; Svenbro 2007, 269.

<sup>125</sup> Nilsson 1921, 385; Svenbro 2007, 270–271.

<sup>126</sup> Nilsson 1921, 387.

emergent people should live for a long enough period isolated so that the “mixture” could “become settled and purified.”<sup>127</sup> According to Nilsson, the early history of the Greeks offered an illustration of this: when the Greeks invaded Greece, they blended with the native races they encountered. However, a prolonged period of isolation and inbreeding followed and so the race was formed “to which ancient culture and the foundations of our own culture are due.”<sup>128</sup> Nilsson suggested that an analogous process had taken place in early Roman history.<sup>129</sup>

Nilsson produced a Swedish version of his article which appeared in 1923, under the title ‘Rasblandningarnas omfång och betydelse i det romerska kejsarriket’ (‘The scope and significance of racial mixtures in the Roman Empire’), in a series of the Swedish Society for Racial Hygiene for which Lundborg was responsible.<sup>130</sup> According to Lundborg, interbreeding among the three races of Sweden—the Swedes, the Finns and the Sami—had damaging consequences and, as has been observed, there are parallels between his arguments and terminology and Nilsson’s.<sup>131</sup> At the same time there is a wider, international context. Svenbro has called attention to how biological explanations of the decline of the Roman Empire were making their appearance in European and American scholarship of the time, competing (or being combined) with political, economic and other types of explanation.<sup>132</sup> Predictably, they would later be favoured by pro-Nazi historians.<sup>133</sup>

Nilsson came back to the question of genetics in a later article, ‘Über Genetik und Geschichte’, also published in *Hereditas* in 1939.<sup>134</sup> Nilsson significantly reiterated there his conviction that the study of heredity was of the greatest importance for the understanding of historical events and rejected the objections raised that the laws of heredity applied only to the physical and not to the psychical qualities of humans.<sup>135</sup> However, Nilsson also asserted that the term “race” had been so misused that it left

<sup>127</sup> Nilsson 1921, 387.

<sup>128</sup> Nilsson 1921, 388.

<sup>129</sup> Nilsson 1921, 388.

<sup>130</sup> Nilsson 1923; Svenbro 2007, 272–275, 294; Bengtsson 2014, 138.

<sup>131</sup> Saura 2020, 5–6; on the relation between Nilsson and H. Lundborg see Svenbro 2007, 294–295.

<sup>132</sup> Svenbro 2007, 285–289; Gagné 2019, 51.

<sup>133</sup> Chapoutot 2016, 333–351.

<sup>134</sup> Nilsson 1939; Svenbro 2007, 275–279.

<sup>135</sup> Nilsson 1939, 211–212.

a bitter taste and chose to use the more neutral “variant”.<sup>136</sup> In this new article Nilsson stated that he remained fully convinced of the validity of his earlier thesis that the chaos produced by unlimited bastardizing contributed to the fall of the Roman Empire, though he qualified it as being only one and not the sole factor.<sup>137</sup> However, he now expressed his intention to consider the question from its other side.<sup>138</sup> Dismissing the notion of their original racial purity, he argued that all the *Kulturvölker* of the ancient world, and not just the Greeks and the Romans to whom he had referred in his 1921 article, had emerged out of the mixing of different peoples.<sup>139</sup> It should be noted that in the 1939 article as well Nilsson argued that that outcome was made possible because there had crucially been enough time for the “mixtures” of peoples to be stabilized and purified.<sup>140</sup>

The discussion on the influences on Nilsson from race biology and scientific racism has tended to focus on the two articles he wrote in *Hereditas* in 1921 and 1939 and his ‘Rasblandningarnas omfång och betydelse i det romerska kejsarriket’ of 1923 and on how far the 1939 article, though itself steeped in race biology, signified a change from the opinions he held in the early 1920s and a rejection of Nazi racial theories.<sup>141</sup> Undoubtedly, Nilsson’s 1939 article indicates a partial shift. However, this should not make us lose sight of the fact that while not being pro-Nazi,<sup>142</sup> Nilsson was and remained influenced by race biology and scientific racism even after the end of the Second World War.<sup>143</sup> In this context, we should observe that although race biology was already being questioned in Sweden by the mid-1930s,<sup>144</sup> and, although in the meantime the Holocaust had revealed all too clearly the abhorrent consequences of scientific racism, ‘The race problem of the Roman Empire’ of 1921, which tends to be regarded as having been superseded by the ‘Über Genetik und Geschichte’ of 1939, was reprinted along with the latter in the second volume of Nils-

<sup>136</sup> Nilsson 1939, 213; Svenbro 2007, 277.

<sup>137</sup> Nilsson 1939, 214.

<sup>138</sup> Nilsson 1939, 214; Svenbro 2007, 277.

<sup>139</sup> Nilsson 1939, 214, 221; Bengtsson 2014, 139; Saura 2014, 121.

<sup>140</sup> Nilsson 1939, 221.

<sup>141</sup> Svenbro 2007, 278–279, 283; 2020, 19; Bengtsson 2014; Saura 2014, 119, 121; 2020, 6.

<sup>142</sup> On Nilsson’s stance during the Nazi period to which there were different sides, see J. Svenbro’s chapter in this volume; Svenbro 2007, 282, 296; Dürkop 2013, 2–3, 207–212.

<sup>143</sup> Cf. Dürkop 2013, 160.

<sup>144</sup> Saura 2020, 5, 7.

son's *Opuscula selecta* in 1952.<sup>145</sup> The *Opuscula selecta* volumes were not a comprehensive but a selective collection of Nilsson's earlier writings and in the preface to the first volume Nilsson gave a list of different categories of pieces that he had decided to leave out. These included those he judged to be of minor importance.<sup>146</sup> However, 'The race problem of the Roman Empire' he chose not to exclude.<sup>147</sup> It is, moreover, both striking and telling that the only alteration he deemed appropriate to make was to change all references to "Aryans" in the 1921 version to "Indo-Europeans" in the version that was reprinted in the *Opuscula selecta* in 1952 and to delete a reference in the former to "physical type". Otherwise, the content with all its extreme scientific racism was left unchanged. In addition, although certainly not given as much emphasis as in the articles that had first been published in the 1920s and 1930s, ideas rooted in race biology and scientific racism continued, as we have seen, to appear in Nilsson's later work such as *Greek piety* and are not absent from his *magnum opus*, the *Geschichte der Griechischen Religion* either.

## B. THE EMERGENCE OF THE NEW

### The Christianization of the Greek world

To return to Nilsson's depiction of Greek religious history in *Greek piety*, he observed that in the climate of great religious fermentation in the Greco-Roman world many joined the mystery cults or converted to Judaism. However, the former were too closely associated with their countries of origin to become universal.<sup>148</sup> As for Judaism, the requirement to abide by the Jewish law curtailed its potential for gaining adherents among non-Jews. Nilsson maintained that "the opportunity which Judaism lost was seized upon by Christianity."<sup>149</sup>

Nilsson laid stress on the point that Christianity could draw on pre-existing monotheistic tendencies in Greek philosophy and religion. He stated that monotheism was long known to Greek philosophers, begin-

<sup>145</sup> Nilsson 1952b.

<sup>146</sup> Nilsson 1951b.

<sup>147</sup> W.K.C. Guthrie (1954, 29) who reviewed Nilsson's *Opuscula selecta* commented "some may doubt the wisdom of republishing without alteration the article on The Race Problem of the Roman Empire".

<sup>148</sup> Nilsson 1948, 180.

<sup>149</sup> Nilsson 1948, 181.



ning with Xenophanes in the 6th century BC.<sup>150</sup> This may be viewed as an implicit dismissal of theories of Greek *Urmonotheismus*: monotheism was old in Greece, but it did not reach as far back as the very origins of Greek religion as their advocates claimed.<sup>151</sup> While the monotheistic tendency was initially confined to philosophical circles, in the course of time it was strengthened and became more widely diffused. Nilsson suggested that this was due to a range of different factors.<sup>152</sup> Besides philosophy, cosmology came to promote monotheism as it postulated a single supreme ruler of the universe. Moreover, the doctrine of powers, which became more and more influential, helped make a major step in the direction of a monotheistic conception of the divine by placing the focus on the gods' power rather than their personality.<sup>153</sup> In addition, Nilsson drew attention to the role of cultural and political developments. The growing interaction between peoples of different religions in the Hellenistic and Roman period favoured syncretism which culminated in the identification of almost all the gods with the sun.<sup>154</sup> Furthermore, the formation of large kingdoms after the conquests of Alexander the Great and especially the emergence of the Roman Empire supported the belief that there was one ruler in heaven just as there was one ruler on earth.<sup>155</sup> Nilsson placed great emphasis in his work on the correspondence between the political and divine plane in antiquity.<sup>156</sup>

Nilsson acknowledged that what he referred to as "pagan monotheism" was "no more than a tendency" which did not abolish polytheism.<sup>157</sup> He argued, however, that this should not make one underestimate its importance. By holding that the plurality of gods either merged with, or were inferior to, a Supreme God, it inculcated both in the minds of

<sup>150</sup> Nilsson 1948, 116. Cf. Nilsson's account of monotheism in Nilsson 1961, 569–578; 1963, 101–120.

<sup>151</sup> For Nilsson's opposition to *Urmonotheismus* see his criticism of the "High God theory" in his first letter to A.D. Nock: Nilsson 1949, 102–106. For Nilsson's rejection of Minoan monotheism, see M. Haysom's chapter in this volume as well as Marinatos 1993, 165; 2015, 68–70.

<sup>152</sup> Nilsson 1948, 116. On Nilsson's account of syncretism, see E. Stavrianopoulou's chapter in this volume.

<sup>153</sup> Nilsson 1948, 108.

<sup>154</sup> Nilsson 1948, 116, 121.

<sup>155</sup> Nilsson 1948, 116, 121.

<sup>156</sup> Cf. Nilsson 1961, 572; 1963, 111–112.

<sup>157</sup> Nilsson 1948, 124.

the pagan élites and the “common people”<sup>158</sup> the belief that a single deity governed the cosmos.<sup>159</sup> Nilsson emphasized that this facilitated the acceptance of Christian monotheism: “Pagan monotheism did much preparatory work for Christianity, and the Christians knew it and appealed to it.”<sup>160</sup>

Nilsson described the expansion of the Christian Church as “an imposing historical drama”.<sup>161</sup> He summarized the principal causes as “firm belief in the truth of Christian religion, universalism, brotherly love [...] also the vitalizing force of self-government in a bureaucratized world”.<sup>162</sup> Moreover, Nilsson laid particular stress on Christianity’s ability to unite all its members into a single community and observed that none of its competitors could match it in this respect. As the Roman emperors eventually realized, only Christianity could provide the Roman world the religious unity it needed.<sup>163</sup>

It should be underscored, however, that, for Nilsson, Christianity’s victory was also and chiefly due to its superiority as a religion over its rivals. Here the impact of his own religious values is most evident.<sup>164</sup> Nilsson observed that the final challenge to Christianity came from a version of Neoplatonism inspired by Iamblichos which rallied the last forces of paganism “under the banners of occultism and theosophy”.<sup>165</sup> He asserted that profound as Neoplatonic theology unquestionably was, it was “disfigured by all manner of magic and superstition”.<sup>166</sup> Nilsson maintained that Christianity won because “at bottom it was healthier than the vaporous paganism of late antiquity”, and he repeatedly claimed that it represented “the wholesome reaction against the theosophy of late antiquity”.<sup>167</sup> Nils-

<sup>158</sup> In ‘The High God and the mediator’ Nilsson (1963, 11) suggested that the decisive proof for the appeal of the “High God” to the “common people” was furnished by funerary inscriptions and the magical papyri.

<sup>159</sup> Nilsson 1948, 124.

<sup>160</sup> Nilsson 1948, 124. Cf. Nilsson 1950a, 552.

<sup>161</sup> Nilsson 1948, 183.

<sup>162</sup> Nilsson 1948, 183. Nilsson (1948, 183) noted that the organization of local communities under the jurisdiction of bishops gave rise to a form of self-government “otherwise denied to subjects of the Roman Empire”.

<sup>163</sup> Nilsson 1948, 183. Christianity’s extraordinary degree of organization and the significance it had for its expansion were stressed by Harnack 1906, 362–364.

<sup>164</sup> On this issue, see also the discussion in J. Mikalson’s chapter in this volume.

<sup>165</sup> Nilsson 1948, 192.

<sup>166</sup> Nilsson 1948, 135.

<sup>167</sup> Nilsson 1948, 194–195. Cf. Nilsson 1950a, 681–682.

son recognized that the mystical tendencies of the time were so strong that they initially threatened to infiltrate and erode Christianity itself. However, phenomena such as prophecy or speaking in tongues were soon suppressed; Gnosticism was defeated. In this context as well, in the eyes of Nilsson, “Christianity represented the sane reaction against occultist phantasms and theosophical fogs.”<sup>168</sup> We are reminded of Nilsson’s earlier comment that in the early 5th century BC the Greek sense for clarity prevailed over “the mists and the figures of clouds.”<sup>169</sup> In Nilsson’s account, then, sanity and opposition to mysticism and occultism appeared to be both Classical Greek and Christian characteristics. Although, as we saw, given the state of paganism at the time, Nilsson regarded Christianity’s victory as a healthy development, he nonetheless regretted that it could not avoid incorporating elements of popular belief such as the cult of relics,<sup>170</sup> once again attesting to his Protestant perspective.

A further shortcoming of the paganism of Late Antiquity, in the opinion of Nilsson, was that it was too heavily influenced by cosmology. The most characteristic example consisted in the cult of the sun.<sup>171</sup> Although it received imperial support, it failed to win over the people, remaining rather the religion of the state.<sup>172</sup> Nilsson suggested that this was because sun-worship was “too cosmological, in its way too scientific, to give the people the god they wanted.”<sup>173</sup> He argued that “religion forgets its true nature if it occupies itself too much with cosmology, because its kernel is man, not the universe.”<sup>174</sup> In contrast to Late Antique paganism, Christianity did not lose sight of this truth.<sup>175</sup> Nilsson’s criticism of the influence of cosmology on religion recalls the objections raised against the interpretation of the Greek gods as personifications of natural elements in 19th- and early 20th- century scholarship: scholars such as Heinrich Dietrich Müller, Curtius and Wilamowitz argued that reli-

<sup>168</sup> Nilsson 1948, 192.

<sup>169</sup> Nilsson 1948, 28.

<sup>170</sup> Nilsson 1948, 195.

<sup>171</sup> Nilsson 1948, 193.

<sup>172</sup> Nilsson 1948, 121.

<sup>173</sup> Nilsson 1948, 122. Cf. “The paganism of late antiquity had too much cosmology in it and too little real religion”: *ibid.*, 195.

<sup>174</sup> Nilsson 1948, 193–194; 1950a, 681–682.

<sup>175</sup> In *Geschichte der Griechischen Religion* and in his later article ‘The High God and the mediator’ Nilsson suggested that another key reason for Christianity’s swift growth and ultimate success was that it provided the most satisfactory answer to the need for a mediator: Nilsson 1961, 576, 578; 1963, 101–120.

gion answered to the needs of the human heart; it was not to be reduced to mechanical responses to the natural world.<sup>176</sup> On the other side, for scholars influenced by romanticism, nature and not least the sun, were capable of inspiring the loftiest sentiments as, for example, for Friedrich Max Müller, the most famous 19th-century advocate of solar interpretations of Indo-European mythology.<sup>177</sup>

At the end of *Greek piety* Nilsson appealed to the testimony of Late Antique authors to suggest that the question over the origins and destination of man became the most profound spiritual problem of the times. Allowing us glimpses into his cultural references and literary taste, Nilsson stated that he was not aware of a better expression of the yearning for answers to this question than the poem, *Whence and whither?* by the major 19th-century Swedish literary writer and intellectual Viktor Rydberg which he cited in English translation.<sup>178</sup> In his poem Rydberg raised the question “Whence come we? Whither must we run?” The poet searched in vain for answers: “a question is that craves reply. / But the answer to ‘whence and whither we?’ [...] lay on silent Darkness’ knee.”<sup>179</sup> As Nilsson stressed, in the last verses of the poem the poet came up with his own answer: “in dreams my home came back to me; / I was a child on my mother’s knee. / The question I’d heard from stars above / got for answer a kiss of love [...] time stood still, till I could see / In my mother’s look, Eternity.”<sup>180</sup> Nilsson argued that Christianity replied in essence in the same manner: “it cast away the cosmological speculations and went back to the old picture of the world. The mystics of late antiquity taught that he who knows his own real nature, he who has *gnosis*, or illumination, is absorbed in God. Christianity substituted a childlike trust in the heavenly Father, ‘Our Father, which art in heaven.’”<sup>181</sup> Although Nilsson remarked that Late Antique paganism was not only to be criticized and that “in its best moments it was the expression of an honest search and a profound longing for the highest”,<sup>182</sup> the effect of portraying it as derailed by cosmology and plagued by mysticism was to highlight the superiority of Christianity which instead established a personal, parental relation be-

<sup>176</sup> Konaris 2016, 152, 165, 289–290.

<sup>177</sup> Kitagawa & Strong 1985, 195; Konaris 2016, 116.

<sup>178</sup> Nilsson 1948, 197–198.

<sup>179</sup> Nilsson 1948, 197.

<sup>180</sup> Nilsson 1948, 198.

<sup>181</sup> Nilsson 1948, 198.

<sup>182</sup> Nilsson 1948, 197–198.

tween God and humans that was appealing both to ancient and modern sensibilities.

We may note the contrast with Murray who in the *Five stages of Greek religion* emphatically declined to subject paganism and Christianity to close comparison, and stated that historians ought to display “sympathy and understanding for both” which resulted in subversive ambiguity as to which side was preferable.<sup>183</sup> Whereas, as we saw, Nilsson cast the clash between Christianity and paganism in terms of a struggle between the forces of sanity and suspect occultist tendencies, Murray offered a much more nuanced picture, suggesting that “the minds that are now tender, timid, and reverent in their orthodoxy would probably in the third or fourth century have sided with the old gods; those of more daring and puritan temper with Christians.”<sup>184</sup> Moreover, unlike Nilsson who placed more emphasis on the flaws of Late Antique paganism, Murray maintained that paganism as it had evolved at the time of its last struggle with Christianity appeared to be “a fairly complete and rational system of thought, which speculative and enlightened minds in any age might believe without disgrace.”<sup>185</sup>

To return to *Greek piety*, it is notable that Rydberg, whose poetry, as mentioned, Nilsson cited at the end of his book, had himself treated the conflict between Greek religion and Christianity in Late Antiquity in one of his best-known works, the historical novel, *The last Athenian* [*Den siste atenaren*] (1859). The novel, set in 4th-century AD Athens round the reign of Julian, described the fighting between Christians and adherents of the old Greek religion, but also the attempts at rapprochement by the most enlightened of the two sides. It ended with the author looking forward to the future when “Antiquity and Christianity pervade each other. Their truths are wedded into a harmonious whole.”<sup>186</sup> The notion of a harmonious synthesis between Classical Greece and Christianity, a favourite with devout Hellenists, but in no way exclusive to them, is strikingly absent from the end of Nilsson’s *Greek piety*, although the book contains some hints in this direction, such as, for example, the point that pagan monotheism helped pave the way for Christianity and the view that the Classical Greek spirit and Christianity were on common ground in rejecting occultism.

<sup>183</sup> Murray 1925, 234.

<sup>184</sup> Murray 1925, 234.

<sup>185</sup> Murray 1925, 231.

<sup>186</sup> Rydberg 1883, 555.

## Conclusion

Nilsson sent copies of *Greek piety* to friends and colleagues including Nock and Eric Robertson Dodds, who wrote letters to Nilsson to thank him. They both stated that they would use it in their teaching courses on Greek religion without making any mention of its residual scientific racism. Nock, who was aware of, and touched by, Nilsson's intention to dedicate the volume to him,<sup>187</sup> called *Greek piety* "extremely wise and helpful" and stated that it was "just the book that I want for my young students to read, for it brings out all the essential differences of the Greek point of view."<sup>188</sup> Dodds wrote to Nilsson that the appearance of *Greek piety* was particularly opportune as he was preparing a series of lectures on Greek religion, adding that "your chapters on Hellenistic Religion will be particularly welcome to my students, as we have hitherto had in England no general good survey of this part of the field."<sup>189</sup> Conventional letters of thanks may have been more suited for praising or inflating the merits of the book rather than expressing criticism of it. However, it is notable that Nilsson's argumentation in terms of blood to account for what he saw as Hellenism's surrender to the Orient was also passed over in silence in most contemporary reviews of *Greek piety*, despite the emphasis it was given in it and despite Nilsson's statement that the book contained the conclusions he had reached after half a century's work on Greek religion. Thus Raffaele Pettazzoni (who had signed the Fascist 'Manifesto of race' of 1938),<sup>190</sup> Festugière as well as other reviewers praised or criticized aspects of the book without referring to it.<sup>191</sup> Insofar as I have been able to ascertain, only Guthrie and Henri Jeanmaire in his review of the French translation of *Greek piety* mentioned the role it attributed to blood.<sup>192</sup> Thus Guthrie noted in his review that for Nilsson "what mattered [as regards the question of 'Oriental' influences on Hellenic culture] was not so much the impact of actual Oriental doctrines as the fact that so many of the later representatives of Hellenism were themselves of non-Greek

<sup>187</sup> Letter from A.D. Nock to Nilsson, 7 May 1948.

<sup>188</sup> Letter from A.D. Nock to Nilsson, 7 June 1948.

<sup>189</sup> Letter from E.R. Dodds to Nilsson, 20 May 1948.

<sup>190</sup> For a discussion of R. Pettazzoni's attitude during the Fascist regime in Italy see Stausberg 2008.

<sup>191</sup> Unmentioned in Tarrant 1947; Pettazzoni 1947–1948; Toynbee 1948; Bömer 1951; A.-J. Festugière made a vague, fleeting reference to the "*mélange des Orientaux et des Grecs*": Festugière 1948, 507.

<sup>192</sup> Guthrie 1949; Jeanmaire 1956.

stock” and went on to cite Nilsson’s contention about the grave consequences of “the thinning out and enfeeblement of the Greek element in the population.”<sup>193</sup> Even Guthrie, however, did not engage further with Nilsson’s claims, but confined himself to remarking that some of Nilsson’s statements will raise doubts.<sup>194</sup> Similarly, Jeanmaire stated that, according to Nilsson, the “Orientalization” occurred because of the mixing of blood and ideas and the emergence of a “hybrid race”, without any further comment.<sup>195</sup>

Despite disagreements over specific points, *Greek piety* was generally favourably reviewed.<sup>196</sup> Festugière, for example, concluded his review by welcoming it as “*un livre pénétrant ... qui instruira même les spécialistes*” while Guthrie, who, as we saw, expressed his reservations about parts of the book, praised its “thought-provoking freshness”.<sup>197</sup> What may have seemed as fresh in the late 1940s would be superseded by the new approaches to Greek religion that emerged in the 1960s, and if Nilsson’s schematic account of the development of Greek religious history would soon appear dated, as to be expected, it does much more so today.<sup>198</sup> However, if we stay on the strengths of the book, besides its erudition and mastery of different types of evidence from the Archaic period to Late Antiquity, we may point to some aspects of Nilsson’s methodology that were distinctive in his day and arguably are still of value.

*Greek piety* offers a sustained illustration of a core principle of Nilsson’s approach as a student of Greek religion, namely that “religion is not a complex of beliefs and ideas, cults and practices, separated from other aspects of human life, [but] is bound to change with historical and social changes”,<sup>199</sup> which prompts the reader to take a dynamic view of Greek religion and consider the interconnections between its changes in the

<sup>193</sup> Guthrie 1949, 134. As mentioned, W.K.C. Guthrie also commented on the lack of wisdom of republishing ‘The race problem of the Roman Empire’ in Nilsson’s *Opuscula selecta*: Guthrie 1954, 29.

<sup>194</sup> Guthrie 1949, 134.

<sup>195</sup> Jeanmaire 1956, 116.

<sup>196</sup> An exception was the review by P. Toynbee of 1948. Although acknowledging the high standards of Nilsson’s scholarship, he found his approach old-fashioned, deploring in particular the lack of engagement with C.G. Jung’s theories which, in his eyes, was essential for furthering the understanding of Greek religion.

<sup>197</sup> Festugière 1948, 505–508; Guthrie 1949, 133.

<sup>198</sup> See J. Mikalson’s chapter in this volume.

<sup>199</sup> Nilsson 1951a, 150. On this aspect, see J. Mikalson’s and E. Stavrianopoulou’s chapters in this volume.

course of time and their historical and social context. Moreover, Nilsson's tendency to consider different, complementary factors in order to account, for example, for the growth of pagan monotheism or the victory of Christianity encourages students of Greek religion to reflect on potential synergies of different elements in explaining religious trends and changes.

However, if *Greek piety* demonstrates some of Nilsson's trademark virtues as a scholar of Greek religion that received the praise of contemporary reviewers, as noted, it also demonstrates aspects that they left unmentioned or unanswered. The volume shows how Nilsson's ideological and religious convictions affected his representation of the history of Greek religion and the analogies he drew between ancient and modern times made explicit how pregnant with implications for the present his treatment of the subject was. A rationalist Protestant predilection for reason, clarity and "sanity" and a suspicion and dislike of "theosophical fogs" is visible throughout his account of the religious history of the ancient world and culminates in the hailing of the victory of Christianity over Neoplatonic and Gnostic theosophy as a healthy outcome. In addition, Nilsson placed emphasis on how Greek culture progressively succumbed to "Oriental" notions and the explanation he offered as to how this "Orientalization" came about attests to the lasting influence of scientific racism. That modern Europeans should take note in order to avoid the fate that befell European civilization in antiquity Nilsson more than intimated. *Greek piety* reveals many different sides and ideas of Nilsson, not least, his prejudices about the "Orient" which he regarded as a diachronic threat to Europe and his enduring belief in the significance of blood.

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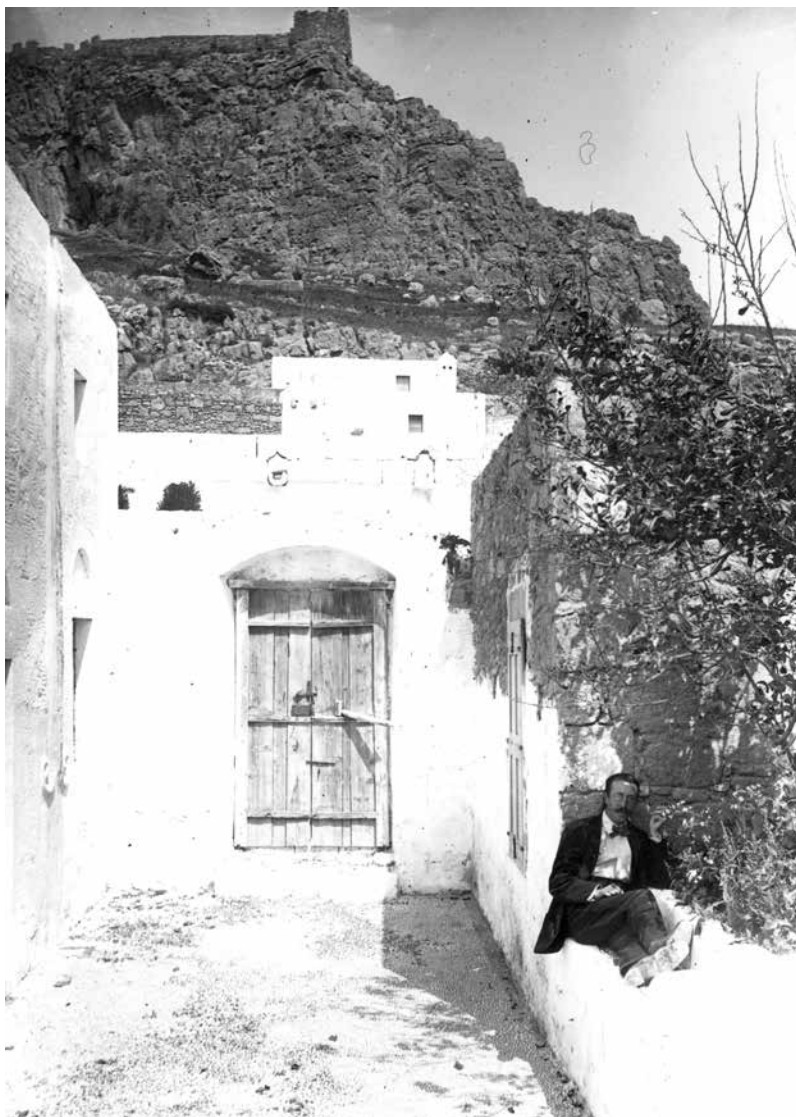
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*Martin P. Nilsson in Lindos, 1907. Photograph in private collection, courtesy of Ingrid Stjernquist.*