

# **The reconstruction of ancient Greek religion: Practicing Hellenic religious tradition in contemporary Greek society**

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## **Abstract**

Ancient Greek religion has primarily attracted the attention of historians and archaeologists in order to understand its structure and place within the ancient Greek polis. The purpose of this article is to present and analyze the reconstruction of the ancient Greek religion in contemporary Greek society through a series of questions: Who are the people who are self-defined as followers of the ancient Greek religion? Through what kind of trajectories did they select this religious path? Which are the main aspects and types of participation? Which are their relations to the broader Orthodox Christian society and the state? Through a qualitative approach and building on the concepts of tradition and memory this article aims to understand the reappearance of the ancient Greek religion and stimulate further research on a neglected academic field.

## **Keywords:**

Reconstructionism, ancient Greek religion, Hellenic religion, Greek society, religious memory, tradition

## **Introduction**

The structure and place of religion in ancient Greece has primarily attracted the scientific interest of historians, archaeologists and anthropologists. The endeavor of the Roman Emperor Julian, who was stigmatized as an Apostate by the Orthodox Church, to revive ancient Greek religion in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, or a later similar effort by the philosopher George Gemistus, Plethon during the Renaissance,<sup>25</sup> have been also extensively studied. Despite the wide interest in ancient Greek religion or the historical efforts to restore it, there is practically no attention paid by the academia in Greece to a gradually emerged phenomenon of the 1990s, which has led to what has been called the reconstruction of ancient Greek religion. This lack of interest

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<sup>25</sup> Plethon is a key-figure in the milieu of the Hellenic religion. He was one of the most renowned philosophers of the late Byzantine time and a pioneer of the revival of ancient Greek scholarship in Western Europe. Plethon moved away from Christianity favoring a return to the worship of the ancient Gods, mixed with Eastern elements from Zoroastrianism.

contradicts to the international developments and the great number of studies and publications regarding the revival of paganism and the numerical rise of pagan groups around the world (Pike, 2001; Strmiska, 2005; Rountree, 2015; Schnurbein, 2016).

It is true that there is a heated debate about the terms used in the research field and before I proceed with the description and analysis of this particular case some clarifications are crucial. Firstly, in this article the term 'reconstruction of ancient Greek religion' is adopted. I acknowledge that the people I spoke to do not fully accept the terms 'ancient' and 'religion'. They argue that their beliefs should not be considered as ancient, because they were practiced through the centuries, sometimes secretly, and that they are still alive supporting the argument of continuation. They also mostly prefer not to call their beliefs and practices as a religion, but as religious tradition, cult or worldview, from the moment they lack sacred texts and dogmas. Even between them, though, one can find a variety of terms used: 'Hellenic religion', 'Hellenic tradition', 'Hellenic polytheism', 'Hellenic cult', 'Hellenic national religion'. Although I fully understand their critical reflections of the terms used I will adopt 'ancient Greek religion' in order to differentiate it from the Orthodox religion which is also sometimes presented as the 'national religion'. I have to admit that Hellenic religion is another term that could be equally used and that is why sometimes it also appears in this article as an alternative of ancient Greek religion. Secondly and related to the above, since 'reconstruction' is the most common term deployed in the literature to describe the reappearance or simply the growth of the ancient religious traditions I will also incorporate it in my approach. Finally, I endorse the term religion, because I contend that 'Hellenic tradition or cult' is actually a religion regardless of the lack of dogmas and sacred books.<sup>26</sup> I agree, though, that this lack of a dogmatic background critically differentiates ancient Greek religion from the monotheistic ones.<sup>27</sup>

The purpose of this article is to briefly present and analyze the landscape of ancient Greek religion in contemporary Greek society trying to fill an existing gap in the academia asking a preliminary set of questions: Who are the people who are currently the followers of the ancient Greek religion? Through what kind of trajectories did select this religious path? Which are the main aspects and types of participation, individual or collective? Which are their relations to the broader Orthodox Christian majority society and the state? Which is the role of tradition and religious memory in this process of reconstructing Hellenic religion? Through a qualitative approach and building on the concepts of tradition and memory, this article aims at understanding the reappearance of ancient Greek religion. It further aims at setting the first steps for further research in the field and at stimulating discussions that will be mostly scientific and less prejudiced.

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<sup>26</sup> Following Dobbelaere I agree that a functional definition applied to any meaning system performing so-called religious functions that would be called religion is not practical and effective. Instead a substantive and exclusive definition is more appropriate. Based on that and as a starting point religion according to Dobbelaere (2011: 600) is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to supra-empirical, transcendent reality codified by a religious authority that unifies all those who adhere to it in a moral single community. Such an approach does not necessarily include dogmas and sacred texts.

<sup>27</sup> I have reflected quite a lot on which terms to adopt, but at some point, the researcher needs to make a final decision, although they might understand that the choice they made is not the most appropriate and that it could lead to reasonable objections by their participants. However, this selection was made exclusively on scientific grounds.

### **The religious landscape of Greek society**

It is a truism to argue that Greek society is a majority Orthodox one and that Christian Orthodoxy has been playing a very crucial role for the last two centuries after the Revolution of 1821 and the formation of the Greek state. According to all the available survey data the vast majority of the population still self-identifies with the Greek Orthodox religion. However, the widespread argument of the 1990s that 99 per cent of the population is Greek Orthodox does not stand still anymore. Nowadays, many opinion polls have shown that Greek people, especially younger generations, seem to move away from the Orthodox religion and the Church declaring themselves as atheists, agnostics, non-believers and non-affiliated. Despite this recorded turn with regard to religious beliefs and practices it is still true that at least more than 85 per cent of the population situates itself in the Greek Orthodox religion and follows its teachings and rituals (Sakellariou, 2021).<sup>28</sup>

Apart from the above it has to be underlined that the numerical domination of the Orthodox does not imply the lack of other religions. Jews, Catholics and Muslims, for example, are among the oldest religious communities found in the Greek territory and their presence is documented even before the establishment of the Greek state. In addition, from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Protestants also arrived in Greece and today most of the main currents of Protestantism can be found in Greek society. Then, of course, one has to count other religious communities like Jehovah's Witnesses or Eastern religions, like Buddhism. The rise of immigration which started in the 1990s, but became wider during the 2000s, added another stone in the religious mosaic of the Greek society. Higher numbers of Muslims arrived from countries of the Middle East, Africa and Asia (Tsitselikis and Sakellariou, 2021), but also Hindus and Sikhs have formed significant communities (Papageorgiou, 2011). Having the above in mind it could be argued that especially in Athens, the Greek capital, a polymorphous religious landscape has been in the process of formation and in many cases is visible in the public space through rituals and sacred places (Vrettos, 2015).<sup>29</sup>

In order to present an accurate perspective of the religious landscape a few words about the place and role of the Orthodox Church of Greece are necessary. Despite the existing but limited number of secular steps incorporated by the state, the Orthodox Church continues to be a powerful and influential institution, with a significant impact upon the Greek political sphere. After the formation of the Greek state in 1830, the Orthodox Church was declared a national Church (1833) and became the state's ideological apparatus reproducing the national ideology. This means that the Orthodox Church and the Greek state established close and collaborative relations. On the one hand the state supported the Church considering it as the 'mother of the nation' and the Church on the other, always supported the state's national policies and ideology. It could be argued that the Orthodox Church of Greece is a Church that functions under the auspices of the state and this is proved by the existing legal framework, which defines the relations between the two institutions and the legal status of the Church (Sakellariou, 2013). According to Article 3 of the Constitution, the prevailing religion in Greece is the religion of the Eastern Orthodox Church of Christ. Further to that, the Constitution starts with the phrase:

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<sup>28</sup> For some recent opinion polls see: [https://www.dianeosis.org/2017/03/tpe\\_2017/](https://www.dianeosis.org/2017/03/tpe_2017/), <https://www.dianeosis.org/2018/03/greeks-believe-2018/>, <https://www.dianeosis.org/2020/03/ti-pistevoun-oi-ellines-to-2020/> and <https://cutt.ly/1fiwKoT> (last accessed 27 December 2021).

<sup>29</sup> See also <https://www.athenssocialatlas.gr/en/article/religion-in-the-city/> (last accessed 27 December 2021).

“In the name of the Holy and Consubstantial and Indivisible Trinity”. Some scholars have argued that as long as there are such statements in the constitution, talking about a secular state is quite problematic (Paparizos, 1998; Dimitropoulos, 2001: 70-80), while others contend that they are not substantial and have principally a symbolic and historical content (Venizelos, 2000: 137-138; Manitakis, 2000: 72-74).

It should further be added that in Article 2 of the first chapter of the law regarding the function of the Orthodox Church and its relation with the state (590/1977) it is mentioned that the Church of Greece should cooperate with the state on themes of common interest, for example, the Christian education of the youth; the religious service in the army; the support of the institution of marriage and family; [...] the establishment of new religious holidays; and asks for the protection of the state whenever the Orthodox religion is insulted. Such a provision also exemplifies the close and privileged relation of the Orthodox Church with the Greek state. Overall, the place and role of the Orthodox Church are crucial for the analysis that will follow especially with regard to the stigmatization of the ancient Greek religion.

A final remark is necessary. Through the years, from the establishment of the Greek state onwards, a significant effort took place both from the Church and the state in order to identify Greece with Orthodox Christianity. Through this endeavor the ideologies of Helleno-Christianism or Helleno-Christian Civilization and Helleno-Orthodoxy were formulated (Gazi, 2004).<sup>30</sup> The main purposes were three: First, to showcase the continuation of the Greek nation from Antiquity to modern times; second, to present Christianity as the only religious tradition that Greeks are obliged to follow; and third, to present as the only acceptable identity the one combining the Greek nation with the Orthodox religion. This last point resulted in the construction of a dominant understanding among the Greek society that a ‘true’ Greek should be Greek-Orthodox (Sakellariou, 2016).

### **The reappearance and reconstruction of ancient Greek religion**

Although the vast majority -if not the absolute majority- of the followers of ancient Greek religion would argue that there was never an actual break between the ancient times and the contemporary revival the fact is that it was in the 1990s when a strong presence of the Hellenic religion started to be observed in the public sphere. The beginning took place with the publication of books and periodicals focusing on Ancient Greece, its myths, mysteries, philosophy, religious practices and beliefs.<sup>31</sup> During the same time, in the mid-1990s, the first websites and forums started to appear on the Internet bringing together people of different places and backgrounds.<sup>32</sup> This, through further communication and discussions, gradually led to the first organized groups in the milieu.<sup>33</sup> Among them were the Greek Association of Antiquarians (1996), the Commission for the Recognition of the Greek Religion of

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<sup>30</sup> These synthetic words consist of Hellenic and Christian or Orthodox, but in their synthetic form Hellenic becomes Helleno- in Greek.

<sup>31</sup> See for example the periodicals *Dipetes* and *The Greek Pantheon*. For an overview of the field see Mini 2000 and the only academic paper I managed to find available exclusively online: [https://www.academia.edu/35305341/Neo\\_Paganism\\_in\\_Greece\\_nationalist\\_and\\_pluralist\\_rhetoric\\_in\\_the\\_battle\\_against\\_the\\_state\\_sponsored\\_Greek\\_Orthodox\\_Church](https://www.academia.edu/35305341/Neo_Paganism_in_Greece_nationalist_and_pluralist_rhetoric_in_the_battle_against_the_state_sponsored_Greek_Orthodox_Church) (last accessed 27 December 2021).

<sup>32</sup> Nowadays a great number of groups related to Hellenic religion are active on the social media, most notably on Facebook with some of them numbering hundreds or thousands of followers.

<sup>33</sup> The milieu could be defined as the people, the physical conditions and events in which someone acts or lives.

Dodecatheon (The 12 Gods) (1996) and the Supreme Council of Ethnic Hellenes (YSEE), which is the legal body of the Hellenic Ethnic Religion (1997). Later in 2000s other groups also appeared e.g. Ellinai (Sacred Association of the Greeks who practice the ancient religion) (2006) and Labrys, a religious community for the resurgence of the sacred hearth of Hellenism (2008).<sup>34</sup> When it comes to numbers and since census data on religious affiliation are not available, only estimations can be made. These bring the number of the followers of the Hellenic religion to a few thousands, while the most recent report (2006) on religious freedom of the U.S. State Department that includes data numbers them at approximately 2,000 people.<sup>35</sup> This number seems quite small since some of the abovementioned groups, number between 6,000 and 12,000 followers in their Facebook official accounts.

The above organizations are mainly based in Athens, but some of them are expanded to other cities of Greece as well or even abroad, e.g. in the United States and Cyprus. They also hold offices and lecture rooms to meet, organize discussions and lectures,<sup>36</sup> e.g. on religious and philosophical issues and to practice religious rites.<sup>37</sup> They additionally practice their rituals either in ancient Greek temples, e.g. of Zeus in Athens city center or they organize excursions to celebrate, for example in Mount Olympus in Macedonia, Northern Greece.<sup>38</sup> This public ritual presence has attracted the attention of the media, the state authorities and the Orthodox Church. The media started to present these rituals, publishing articles and interviews of the main group representatives and this also raised the interest around their beliefs, practices and structure. This interest passed the Greek borders and foreign media (e.g. the BBC, the Guardian and DW) also started to present stories on the topic.<sup>39</sup>

This resurgence and the claim of the public space through rituals in ancient temples or other sacred places made state authorities feel uneasy and sometimes react and oppose to such activity. As one of my interviewees (Dimitris)<sup>40</sup> mentioned in one of those public rituals the police arrived in order to push them out, but the Chief Officer was reporting to the headquarters that such a push back would be impossible since on the one hand the number of the participants was high and on the other hand many families with small children were among them. It was also mentioned that in the past if a group of people would like to make offers to Gods or sing hymns in an ancient place (e.g. Delphi) could be easily arrested by the police (Epicurus, Themis).

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<sup>34</sup> For more information about the abovementioned communities one could look at their websites, some of them also in English <https://www.ysee.gr/about-eng.html>, <http://dodecatheon.blogspot.com>, <http://dodecatheon.blogspot.com> and <https://ancienthellenicreligion.gr> (last accessed 27 December 2021).

<sup>35</sup> For this report see <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2006/71383.htm> (last accessed 27 December 2021).

<sup>36</sup> For some examples see the book presentation on household worship <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nL932Dx366k> and a lecture on the Greek nation and the Hellenic religion <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WhvlMqNNmCU> (last accessed 27 December 2021).

<sup>37</sup> Some groups have been granted a permit to function a religious place. For the rituals taking place indoor see <https://www.ysee.gr/nouminia-oct20.html>. For other activities, e.g. a mythological workshop for children, see <https://www.ysee.gr/mythologiko37.html> (last accessed 27 December 2021).

<sup>38</sup> In Olympus there is an annual meeting taking place every summer called 'Prometheia', after the mythic figure of Prometheus, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QZQFr3IkTI>. A variety of photos and videos from groups' activity can be found in the following links <https://www.ysee.gr/photo.html> and <https://www.youtube.com/user/KoinotitaLabrys> (last accessed 27 December 2021).

<sup>39</sup> See for example: <https://www.dw.com/en/greece-exploring-the-revival-of-ancient-religious-traditions/a-2786954>, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/feb/01/religion.uk> and <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-22972610> (last accessed 27 December 2021).

<sup>40</sup> These names in parenthesis are not the original names of the interviewees, but pseudonyms.

Another crucial aspect that needs to be mentioned is that of the legal recognition. Some of the groups have tried to achieve a legal recognition by the state on religious grounds, while others haven't taken that step forward. For example, in 2006 a Greek court decided that the group Ellinais practices a 'known religion', i.e. a religion with no secret teachings, ideologies and rituals, according to the Greek Constitution and decided that its offices could function as a religious place recognized by the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs.<sup>41</sup> In another case, after the law 4301/2014 on the recognition of religious legal bodies was voted, YSEE applied in order to be recognized as a legal Religious Organization. According to the group the application is still pending at the Supreme Court, after being twice rejected on the grounds that the word 'Ethnic' in the religion's naming could confuse the population, i.e. be confused with the Greek Orthodox religion, which is considered as the prevailing religion in Greece.<sup>42</sup> Despite that, since February 2017, YSEE has been officially recognized as practicing a 'known religion' (Hellenic ethnic religion) according to article 17 of the above mentioned law, followed by a permit granted by the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs to operate an official place of worship in Athens.<sup>43</sup> As all of the interviewees mentioned state authorities seem to have become more mild in their reactions and more tolerant towards their beliefs and practices although they argued that the relation between the state and the Orthodox Church continues to put obstacles in their effort to make ancient Greek religion known to the broader public. This change in state's attitude, though, was not considered genuine, but it was due to the country's participation in the European Union and the following need to comply with the Union's religious freedom instructions (Epicurus, Artemis, Themis, Ira).

Following the above, a short note is necessary with regard to the reactions of the Orthodox Church against the ancient Greek religion. After the appearance and gradual rise of the Hellenic religion in the 1990s and the 2000s the Orthodox Church perceived it as a major threat and decided to establish a special synodical committee 'on the study of ancient cult and neo-idolatry' with the participation of Orthodox Metropolitans, priests and University professors from the Divinity Schools.<sup>44</sup> Into the same direction conferences were organized, publications made, articles written and Internet texts uploaded by Orthodox Metropolitans, lower rank priests and theologians. The main arguments discussed and presented could be summarized as follows. Ancient Greek religion is a dangerous idolatrous cult, related to strange beliefs and practices (even implying Satanistic connections and rituals) and Greek people should avoid it by all means. Further to that, the only true and accepted traditional religion in Greece is and should be that of Orthodox Christianity, the religion of the forefathers (e.g. Conference Proceedings, 2004; Vasileiadis, 2014; Skontzos, 2018). This argument relates to the abovementioned 'Helleno-Christian civilization' and 'Helleno-Orthodoxy', and as it is going to be presented later it has been greatly refuted by the followers of Hellenic religion especially when it comes to the notion of tradition.

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<sup>41</sup> For this decision see: <https://ancienthellenicreligion.gr/diarthrosi-tou-ellin-a-i-s/> (last accessed 27 December 2021).

<sup>42</sup> It is important to note that both for Ethnic and National the same word ('εθνική') is used in the Greek language.

<sup>43</sup> For more details see: <http://www.ysee.gr/about-eng.html> (last accessed 27 December 2021).

<sup>44</sup> For the committee and some of its texts one can see: <http://www.ecclesia.gr/greek/holysynod/committees/ancient/ancient.htm> (last accessed 27 December 2021).

### **Theoretical background and methodology**

The most common research approaches when it comes to the study of the people who change their religious beliefs are those of religious conversion and/or religious identity. Although in this article implicitly both approaches are somehow present, there is no particular theoretical focus either on identity or conversion. The two main theoretical drivers of this research are tradition and memory. Their selection was decided because tradition and its preservation through memory seem to be crucial in the re-construction of ancient Greek religion. Tradition, it will be shown afterwards, plays a crucial role in people's narratives and in communities' discourse. For tradition the seminal work of Edward Shils (1981) is illuminating. In Shils's approach (1981: 12-15), tradition could mean a variety of things, but in its most elementary concept means simply a *traditum*, i.e. something transmitted or handed down from the past to the present. Further, to that he added that traditions develop because of the desire to create something better, truer or more convenient.

Related to religious tradition the concept of religious memory was also considered appropriate for the analysis. In order to transmit religious traditions memory seems fundamental. In other words, tradition could be defined as the sum of objects, practices, ideas and teachings transmitted from generation to generation. The preservation of tradition takes place through the practice of remembrance in order to construct memory and avoid oblivion. Remembrance and memory are extremely important when it comes to the reproduction of religious faith and religious tradition, among families and societies (Halbwachs, 1992; Hervieu-Léger, 2000; Bengtson, 2013). This chain of religious memory (Hervieu-Léger, 2000) is basically reproduced through the family channels. Sometimes this chain breaks up and interruptions in the religious continuity are observed when the younger members of the family stop following and embracing their parents' religious convictions and either convert to other religions or are totally disengaged from religious beliefs (Bengtson 2013: 131-164). According to this approach, family reproduces the memory of the religious group it belongs to and passes it on to the younger members, contributing this way to the construction of their religious identity. According to Assmann (2017: 38-45), who builds on Halbwachs (1992, 1941), there are three types of remembrance: First, the reference to place and time. With regard to Hellenic religion this could include sacred places, the nature, the city or the village, in terms of the place and the festivities calendar when it comes to time; Second, the reference to the group. In this case, this means that memory and the acts of remembrance take place within a particular group or the milieu of Hellenic religion and contributes to the construction of the group's identity; Third, the possibility of reconstruction. That means that the past can't be preserved as it was and it is always related to the society's context and conditions each time, something that was supported by a number of interviewees as it will be discussed later.

Regarding the methodology it was the qualitative approach that was selected. A number of fundamental texts, online and printed, and a series of videos and photos were systematically collected and analyzed. Further, to that nine semi-structured interviews (6 males, 3 females) took place with younger and older members of the communities in the milieu with their ages varying from 23 to 60 years old. One of them was a university student, one a pensioner and seven in full-time jobs. However, two of those in the job market were also studying either on graduate or post-graduate level. Five of them were born and raised in Athens, while the rest four were born in small towns and villages in other places around Greece and came to Athens

for studies, around 18-19 years old. All the participants were of lower- or middle-class socio-economic backgrounds. The interviews were very informative and added a more personal and experiential aspect and information on the already collected material. They were conducted from January to June 2021 and their duration was from one to two hours. All the interviews took place online due to the Covid-19 restrictions and the participants were given pseudonyms.<sup>45</sup>

### **The role of tradition in contemporary trajectories**

The resurgence of Hellenic religion at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is described by the people in the milieu as a return to the roots, a revival of tradition. Tradition then becomes a central notion in groups' and participants' narratives and self-presentations. The Supreme Council of Ethnic Hellenes (YSEE), in its official website mentions that it was founded in June 1997 in order "to provide moral and material support and work towards the restoration of the Ethnic, Polytheistic Hellenic tradition, religion and way of life in Modern Greek society which is dominated by spiritual stagnation, irrationalism and theocracy". In addition, in the first official press release of the 17<sup>th</sup> of July 1997 regarding its foundation it was mentioned that:

"For years, we the Ethnikoi [Ethnic] Hellenes, i.e. contemporary Greeks who still respect and honor the rites and beliefs of our ancestors, the Hellenes, remained stoically patient when faced with the systematic, and not at all coincidental, negligence and degradation of our monumental and living ethnic heritage by a 'Greek' State, which is obviously enslaved by an economic-religious giant whose cultural and logical interests promote the open scorn for our real (i.e. pre-Christian) ethnic Tradition. [...] Under this new and terrifying reality that we all see being formed against real Hellenism, [...] personalities from the community of the Ethnikoi [Ethnic] Hellenes have decided to found the Council of Ethnic Hellenes, which shall aim at the protection and restoration of the real (pre-Christian) Hellenic Tradition. We shall work by all legal means necessary towards awakening the Greek people and securing respect, survival, natural and moral protection, restoration and honor of our monuments, symbols, ideas and living forms of ancient Hellenic Tradition [...]"<sup>46</sup>

Tradition and its protection is a major goal of other groups as well. Labrys religious community, for example, "aims to preserve, promote and practice the Hellenic polytheistic religious tradition through public rituals, lectures, publications, theatrical and musical events, and other forms of action". In addition, the group's vision is "to restore the Hellenic polytheistic religious tradition and by extension the Hellenic worldview and lifestyle to its rightful place, as a respected, acknowledged, legally recognized and fully functional spiritual path"<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> The initial design of the research started in autumn 2019 and included face-to-face interviews and participant observation. However, the Covid-19 pandemic had a direct impact on the research process and the participant observation had to be reluctantly abandoned.

<sup>46</sup> For the above see: <https://www.ysee.gr/about-eng.html> (last accessed 27 December 2021).

<sup>47</sup> See <http://www.labrys.gr/en/about.html> (last accessed 27 December 2021).



The abovementioned importance and protection of tradition was mentioned by all the interviewees, with continuous, direct or indirect, references to the ancient tradition and the ancestors. With regard to the relation of the contemporary resurgence and the ancient tradition all the interviewees renounced that there is a gap between the two time periods. It was argued that one way or another, the ancient religious tradition survived through the centuries and was preserved by groups of followers pertaining close relations to antiquity. This approach supports the definition of reconstructionism as a methodology for developing and practicing historical forms of paganism in the modern world, beginning from the twin assumptions that the religious expressions of the ancestors were meaningful enough in themselves and that forms of religious practice remain valid across time (Campbell, 2000: 21). Such a definition, though, would probably not be fully accepted by the participants, most notably because of the use of the term paganism.<sup>48</sup> Otherwise, the rest are very close to their views with regard to Hellenic religion.

Ancient religion is characterized as the religion of the forefathers with which it is very difficult to cut ties, because it is “my descent” as one interviewee openly stated (Artemis). This clearly distinguishes it from a foreign, as it was characterized, religion, like Christianity, which is perceived as a current of Judaism (Pericles). Further to that, it was mentioned that “all the monotheistic religions are one-dimensional, they are flat and all nations are the same within them, contrary to what takes place in traditional [i.e. ethnic] religions” (Athena). As a consequence, when they mention the word tradition they mean the religion of Ancient Greece and not the Orthodox religion which is considered as imposed upon the Greek society.

Two points should be underlined with regard to tradition. The first relates to the authenticity of the ancient tradition. From this perspective, Orthodox Christianity is not the ‘true’, the authentic, religious tradition of the Greek people. This argumentation dominates the field and almost all the groups who are active in it. This is contrary to what is found in other cases, e.g. in Malta (Rountree, 2014: 96), where the local Catholic religion is accepted as the indigenous religion by pagan groups. The second has to do with their endeavor to change this dominant perception, and at the same time to protect and preserve the ancient Hellenic religious tradition. One of the main debates in the literature (Gallagher, 1994; Anczyk and Vencálek, 2013) on pagan studies is that ancient religions are religions without converts, because their followers argue that they have not been converted to another religion, but returned to the religion of the ancestors breaking a forced religious memory chain within Christianity. In almost all the interviews this implicitly came into discussion. It was mentioned that listening to the ancient myths in their infancy (Athena), visiting or living close to ancient temples (Artemis, Dimitris), or establishing contacts with other people in the milieu (Plato) woke up something in them which is described as an internal tendency, an attraction, an aptitude, something that spoke to them or even a calling in the Weberian sense when they decided to become more active in a group and overtake a series of responsibilities.

One crucial question is how this tradition has survived and has become a living memory for those who follow ancient Greek religion. There is a variety of trajectories, i.e. individual pathways shaped by structural, group and individual factors that led people to ancient Greek

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<sup>48</sup> The terms pagans, neo-pagans, heathens, wiccans have been at the center of heated debates (Strmiska 2005: 4-10) and they were all rejected by the interviewees. Especially, the terms wiccans and pagans were almost considered an insult to some of them.

religion. As it was expected all of them grew up in a Greek-Orthodox family environment - with one exception of a Spaniard who has lived in Greece for thirty years and grew up in a Catholic family- in some cases stricter compared to others, but no one had any exact and clear idea or knowledge of ancient Greece's religious tradition. What was also interesting was that those who grew up in the periphery of Athens, small towns or villages (Dimitris, Athena, Artemis), or abroad (Plato), were fascinated by the ideal of ancient Greece, the myths they learned at school, visits or indirect contacts with archaeological places and of course the arrival to Athens was a cornerstone in this process towards the formation of the Hellenic religious identity. Athens with its historical and archeological significance exercised a symbolic influence over the newly arrived. In addition, as they admitted in the big city one can have access to material (books, periodicals), meet people and of course one can visit archeological places of great historical importance. For those over their forties the first contacts with the ancient Greek religion took place through the thematic periodicals published in the 1990s and only on a second level the Internet played a role in this process. Apart from the periodicals the reading of ancient texts were mentioned as another important part of their trajectories. Ancient texts familiarized them with the ancient thinking, religion, everyday practices and philosophy and influenced their approach of the rituals. Overall, it seems that as it has been argued (Reid 2009: 180) reading, mainly books or periodicals, and contact with people are playing a central role in the first communication with the milieu, while for the younger ones the Internet also played a significant role (Cowan, 2005).

Three final points with regard to trajectories should be discussed. The first is that as it comes out and verified by one interviewee (Dimitris) there are two main trends with regard to the family environment in the milieu that could explain their trajectory to Hellenic religion. One includes environments which were very devoted to the Christian religion. This religious element, the piety, was mentioned as crucial in their religious quest, because this close connection to the divine created a fertile ground for their ending to Hellenic religion. As two interviewees mentioned "the positive was the pre-existence of religiosity, the emotion of religiosity, and the repetition [of the rituals]" (Athena) and "I was enjoying the devoutness in the Church, [...] this shows a relation with the divine" (Artemis). Another trend refers to more open and liberal environments offering them the opportunity to open up their minds and select another religious path (Aris, Epicurus). The second point is that puberty is a crucial time for religious as well as other quest in people's lives and this is totally verified by all the interviewees. The third is that, some participants broke the family religious chain in a short time of one or two years after the beginning of their quest (Pericles, Epicurus), while for others a longer time, five or even ten years, was proved necessary in order to take that step further (Artemis, Plato, Ira).

Apart from the religious background another issue was the reactions from their family, professional and friendly environment. Although, in some cases liberal reactions and openness were mentioned, in others negative and stereotypical comments were also present. As one interviewee mentioned:

"At the beginning when I was telling my friends and boyfriends that I am a follower of the ancient religion they were 'oh, she is very alternative'. But when they were watching it in practice, as something that was repeated, for example

‘every Sunday I will go there’, meaning that this is something on which I will dedicate my free time, they were saying, ‘come on my friend, you will spend all this time on this thing? It becomes weird’” (Athena).

All of them agreed that compared to twenty or thirty years ago Greek society has become more tolerant towards ancient Greek religion. As elsewhere (Pike, 2001: xi-xii) in the past there have been threats and physical attacks against them, e.g. the burning of a bookstore publishing books about ancient Greece in Athens city center,<sup>49</sup> but this is not the case anymore. There are still people who would stop them on the street if they see them practicing a short ritual, offering to a small altar, arguing that the Greeks were and should continue to be Greek-Orthodox (Plato), but overall in their opinion the society seems to be more open and interested in who they are and what they do.

### **Theology, values and ideology**

When it comes to the discussion about theology the opinions vary. On the one hand there are those groups and people who argue that theology is a strong part of the ancient tradition and is basically part of the ancient philosophy. As one interviewee argued, “the great power of the ancient Greek religion is its theology. If a Christian theologian wants to be good enough, he needs to study Neo-Platonism” (Dimitris). The main argument of this approach is that all the philosophical texts of the ancient philosophers discussing about religion and the existence of Gods are basically forming the theology of Hellenic religion. Some groups, e.g. YSEE, have published brief booklets about the ancient Greek religion, including a generic theological section on “Greek national religion: Theology and praxis”,<sup>50</sup> where they describe the broader theological context, but with no specific reference to philosophers or philosophical currents.

Not all they agree that theology is a central part of the ancient religion and practice. Some argue that since they don’t have any dogmas and holy books, theology only relates to philosophical currents (Epicurus), but on the community level they oppose any identification with specific philosophical paths. Any such choice is considered a personal one and not one that should be endorsed by a group or the whole milieu as it is the case with monotheistic religions. Any member could select Platonism, Neo-Platonism, Epicureanism, etc., but similarly as selecting a political ideology or any other ideological system. As it was mentioned, “when it comes to philosophy, politics, theology, every person can hold different tastes, for example, I like the mountains, you prefer the sea. There is no theology behind [the rituals], just Mythology, the myths are the basis of our festivities” (Plato).

Such an argument does not imply, however, that everyone is free to do whatever they want within the community or in the broader milieu of the Hellenic religion. As it was argued, “you can’t be dogmatic in our circles, because we don’t have a dogma [laughing], [...] there are of course some guiding principles that one needs to follow because they are based on tradition, these are things that you need to follow” (Plato). Values, in that sense, are present and should be accepted by the people. In some cases, they are openly stated in the group’s texts:

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<sup>49</sup> This was an arson attack against the Verettas publications in Athens in 1997. Those who attacked wrote in the bookstore’s walls the word ‘purification’ and threw leaflets of a group named ‘Group of fighting Orthodox Christians’.

<sup>50</sup> See <http://www.ysee.gr/download/YSEE-THEOLOGIA-KAL-PRAXIS.pdf> (last accessed 27 December 2021).

“The values that govern and guide Labrys religious community are: Eusebia (Piety), in our relationship with the Gods; Organikotis (Kinship), in our relationships within the Community; Dikaiosyne (Justice), in terms of members’ relations within the Community and also as a guiding principle in the conduct of the community as a whole towards third parties. The members of Labrys religious community also aim at achieving Eudaimonia [happiness] through attaining freedom, autonomy and self-sufficiency”.<sup>51</sup>

As one can observe values are shared within the community and should be accepted by members but there is no similar provision for theological or philosophical currents. In the words of one interviewee, “it doesn’t matter if you have read Homer or Hesiod. The most important is piety. To be possessed by Gods and be pious is the A and Z” (Pericles). Piety was mentioned by almost all the interviewees as one of the most if not the most important value that people should follow in their everyday life (Ira, Aris).

Morality is a crucial aspect of the values debate, especially when it comes to the milieu of ancient Greek religion. Most of them have faced such arguments, in fact accusations, that they are immoral, that they participate in orgies, that they accept polygamy, etc. (Athena). As one interviewee has put it, “morality is a social phenomenon, and not a religious one. Society formulates morality and I think that the ancient religion is more moral compared to Christianity. In the later you have ten commandments, while in the first you have 100 Delphic maxims” (Aris). From the discussion about theology and values it comes out that these are not necessarily related and that the lack of a theological framework does not lead to the lack of values and moral guidelines. Further to that, an interesting point made by the majority of the participants was that modern societies have undergone a long time of moral decay and that the return to the ancient values could be a refreshment and effective response to this decadence.

Although not directly related to theology and values the role of politics and political ideology is an important parameter when it comes to the ancient Greek religion milieu. All the interviewees mentioned that they are aware and many times had to confront accusations of being related to the extreme-right or even neo-Nazi groups, like Golden Dawn.<sup>52</sup> A careful search on the Internet offers a number of people and groups in the Hellenic religion milieu to be situated close or identify with extreme-right views and ideas. However, this is not the case for the milieu as a whole. As all the respondents argued such people did and still do exist among them, but they are a minority and shouldn’t characterize the communities. In some cases, they mentioned extreme-right figures who tried to appropriate Hellenic religion for political purposes.<sup>53</sup> To support that they also mentioned UFO fans among them or conspiracy theorists who also gave a bad name to Hellenic religion (Artemis, Dimitris, Themis, Ira). The closer study of the milieu does not reveal any special ties with the extreme-right verifying Berger’s conclusion (2019:123-155) that among contemporary neo-pagans extreme-right ideology is not dominant, although exceptions to this could be found, especially in Eastern countries, e.g. Russia (Pilkington and Popov 2009: 300). Some interviewees also argued that this

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<sup>51</sup> See <http://www.labrys.gr/en/about.html> (last accessed 27 December 2021).

<sup>52</sup> For Golden Dawn, see Psarras 2012.

<sup>53</sup> For the role of religion, including neo-paganism, in the extreme-right see the interesting volume of Marzouki, McDonnell and Roy 2016.

stigmatization of the Hellenic religion and its identification with the extreme right took place because the political Left in Greece confronted Ancient Greece as a taboo and ‘offered’ it to the extreme-right (Epicurus) creating an open space for fascists to take advantage of that (Themis). It was also argued that it sounds very strange that a Hellenic polytheist could be a fascist (Ira).

Overall, and as already supported by scholars studying paganism worldwide (Berger, 2019: 153-155; Rountree, 2015: 10), the followers of Hellenic religion are not indifferent about politics and in many cases, they engage in social and political issues. They are organizing blood donations, they have publicly expressed their views on social and political issues (e.g. immigration, foreign policy), they are involved in environmental initiatives, they support gender equality and they hold their own political ideologies. The main outcome from this section is that while theology and politics are actually present in many perspectives among the broader milieu and in some cases seem to play a crucial role in the identity formation it is values and rituals which are considered as more important. These are the values and practices coming from the ancestors and memory plays a crucial role in their preservation and continuation nowadays and in the future.

### **Practices and participation: Individual and collective**

Through the observation and analysis of the collected material and the conducted interviews the rituals are one of the most, if not the most important, elements of ancient Greek religion. As already mentioned, theology and philosophical currents are an issue of private choice, while the rituals and celebrations are not. According to one interviewee, “if there is no act [i.e. ritual] we talk only theoretically about religion, not about real religion” (Aris), meaning that “you can’t just read some books and place yourself in Hellenic religion you also need to practice the rituals” (Epicurus). The rituals are considered the A and Z of the Hellenic religion (Themis),

“They weight more [compared to philosophy]. To those people who want to come today and follow the Hellenic religion, you don’t give them a book with ten rules...If someone does not come to the rituals, to feel, to learn, there is no way...there is this feeling during the ritual, it is not a theory” (Epicurus).

The ritual was described also as a catalyst in order for the participant to decide to get into the religious practice even further with an emphasis put on some particular rituals of Dionysian character which are described as very interesting, especially for women, implying a crucial impact upon their mood.

“The ritual itself was determinant for me, the experience. It is very different to stand outside and just discuss over a topic and very different to participate. [...] the religious sentiment can’t be transmitted by anyone. [...] A woman who hasn’t participated in a Dionysian ritual ... [she misses a lot] otherwise she has to pay visits to psychologists and receive medication ... [if you participate] afterwards you feel better (Ira).

One preliminary division between the practices is that some of them are taking place indoor, at home or in offices and sanctified altars, recognized as sacred places by the state. However, as it came out, the outdoor rituals in the nature and sacred places are in some perspective more important. The relation with the nature, the earth, was mentioned by many interviewees as a key-point for their beliefs and the broader religion (Artemis, Epicurus), and emphasis was added in order to signify that “in nature is where a ritual should take place and not just at home” (Pericles). Such rituals include those dedicated to Zeus, Apollo, Dionysus, Athena, and other Gods and Goddesses and they take place in Athens and elsewhere in Greece (e.g. in Mountain Olympus, in the temple of Zeus in Athens city center, in the hill of Philopappos in Athens). A final point with regard to the rituals is that they are organized based on the ancient calendar which is lunar and which in many cases was different between the various regions of ancient Greece. From this point of view those who reside in Athens they tend to follow the ancient calendar of Attica, i.e. of the broader region of Athens. It is also important to mention that although the people in the milieu are mainly following the ancient tradition when it comes to ritual they argue that there are also differences with the past. For example, they don't sacrifice animals and in some instances, they have established new rituals in order to strengthen the bonds among them and create more opportunities to meet.<sup>54</sup> The above brings in mind the first and third types of remembrance described by Assmann mentioned above, i.e. the reference to place and time and the possibility of reconstruction.

Another division that could be made regarding the rituals is between those practiced at home and the public ones. The community of Labrys has published a book (Labrys, 2014) - also translated in English- on household worship and home rituals, describing them and offering guidelines to those interested in practicing them. Household rituals are considered important but the public rituals are those considered building bonds within the community and the broader social environment. As it was mentioned by one interviewee:

“Household ritual is a fundamental dimension for the development of the Greek religion from down to top. [...] In order to have a complete experience of the religious phenomenon you need to practice both, the household and the collective, the public. Internalization, making something completely private, is not positive, you need both. The collective helps for the openness towards the society. You need to go out in order to alter the climate against you. [...] If you don't go public you can't change what people think about you, you can't do that individually” (Aris).

As it was expected, participation relates to a variety of parameters. For example, those living in Athens are easier to participate compared to those who live in smaller towns or villages around Greece. Examples of people who had to move from Athens and participation became difficult were given by the interviewees. As it was underlined this primarily relates to the public

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<sup>54</sup> One such example is the ceremony of Helioidites which is a modern ceremony performed on the first day of the week of the solar calendar, i.e. Sunday. This is a ceremony in which due honor is given to the Sun, not only on a physical level but mainly on the mental level. Helioidites was established as a good spiritual exercise to be followed unfailingly each week on a particular day which is a resting day for most people. For more details see [http://www.labrys.gr/en/text\\_helioidites.html](http://www.labrys.gr/en/text_helioidites.html) (last accessed 27 December 2021).

rituals and not the household ones, which are still practiced by them. This is another example similar to the one mentioned earlier in the section on trajectories with people moving from the periphery to the big cities, in this case describing the opposite direction from Athens to small towns and villages. This verifies the argument that the city, especially Athens, was and at some point still is an open and fertile ground for the ancient religion to flourish. Apart from the distance, time is another reason that has an impact upon participation. There are people who participated for a couple of times, but then they disappeared due to lack of time or others who participate very rarely. As it came out women do participate much in the communities and the rituals taking leading roles, e.g. as priestesses. When it comes to new members there are still newcomers although there seems to be a stabilization of the rise that took place in the 1990s and 2000s. As one interviewee put it, “the active participation in groups has been diminished, but the social acceptance by the society has been raised as well as individual interest” (Aris).

When it comes to rituals two words seem to appear as crucial: *Emotion* and *experience*. The emotions of and from participation, especially the collective one, are considered very important. They can't be described with words unless someone experiences a ritual. This kind of experience is presented as unique and more important from any theology or book reading. As it was mentioned, “no matter how much you read, if you don't meet someone with experience [in order to participate] you can't reach a desirable level” (Pericles) and that “books are good, but it is not only reading, it is also if this is inside you” (Plato). In her seminal work on solitary pagans, Berger argues that there is a sharp increase of solitary practitioners leading to the conclusion that the primary face of contemporary paganism is that of those who practice alone (Berger 2019: 156). Although statistical data do not exist for Greece it came out that solitary practitioners do exist for the reasons mentioned above (e.g. distance from a large city and group, lack of time, etc.). In fact, some interviewees argued that people now practice more individually compared to the past (Aris, Epicurus), but this relates to the broader developments (e.g. way of life, individualism, etc.). However, and contrary to what seems to become a mainstream trend in the pagan field around the world, solitary practice is not the ideal in the milieu of ancient Greek religion. When the interviewees were asked about this possibility, they disagreed with such an approach. They all understood people's difficulties to participate collectively, not necessarily in organized groups, but in public, collective rituals, however they argued that without the collective there is something missing. From this point of view, it could be argued that such a solitary path does not exactly follow the ancient tradition contributing this way to the loss of memory and the oblivion of public rituals and this is identified with the second type of remembrance as presented by Assmann, with regard to the reference to the group and the formation and/or strengthening of its identity and internal bonds.

Apart from the religious rituals, cultural festivals and commemoration services are also organized. For example, an annual celebration of Attika Dionysia dedicated to Dionysus has been established promoting the Hellenic worldview with the participation of artists, musicians, composers, actors, directors, choreographers, dancers, music and dance groups, sports, cultural and other associations who reflect with their work on this part of Greek tradition.<sup>55</sup> Others, have been also organizing ceremonies to commemorate the battle of Marathon or the battleship

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<sup>55</sup> For details see <http://www.labrys.gr/en/events.html> and <http://dionysia.labrys.gr> (last accessed 21 December 2021).

of Salamis against the Persians.<sup>56</sup> Overall, it is clear that memory and remembrance practices are at the core of the Hellenic religion including both religious rituals and cultural and historical events and ceremonies.

### **Conclusions**

After the above brief analysis with regard to Hellenic religion in contemporary Greek society could we end with some conclusions? Although further research is necessary the findings could be summarized as follows: First, the reconstruction of ancient Greek religion that begun in the 1990s is still active although perhaps not flourishing as in the 2000s. Secondly, both the state and the Greek society have become more tolerant and open towards Hellenic religious tradition, although the Orthodox Church is still very negative and stigmatizes its followers. Third, tradition is a key-term in peoples' narratives and official texts. Tradition and its preservation form a goal of great value in the milieu and in many cases is preferred compared to the term 'religion'.

Fourth, this tradition is preserved through the cultivation of memory. From this, perspective memory becomes central in the analysis. On the one hand, the followers of Hellenic religion are breaking the chain with the Christian memory they were brought up with and on the other they try to establish a new religious memory or from their perspective to restore the ancient chain of religious memory. This memory includes the cultural memory of ancient Greece and the memory of the myths and rituals as part of the Hellenic religious tradition. That said, the types of remembering are the reference to place and time (ancient temples, sacred places and festivities calendar of ancient Greece as a time frame); the reference to the group (memory practices within the group); and the opportunity of reconstruction (adjusting to the modern context, establishing new celebrations).

A final but important aspect is that memory seems to act as a kind of resistance within a dominant Greek-Orthodox society. In this memory construction through acts of remembrance, rituals play the central role. According to Assmann (2017: 9, 14), all rituals contain this dual character of repetition and evocation to the present, an evocation of the cultural meaning. These rituals include both those practiced at home, alone or in small groups, and those in public, which are considered as equally or even more important.

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<sup>56</sup> For more information see <https://www.ysee.gr/Isimeria2020.html> and <https://www.ysee.gr/Salamina2020.html> (last accessed 27 December 2021).



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