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**Panel: Religious Texts within the Liberal Arts**

**Title: Homer's Polytheism**

### **Questions**

It is difficult to teach religious books in a liberal arts classroom. The difficulty has to do with the way they are read outside the classroom, where reading religious books is often a form of devotion. This devotion assumes a belief in the God of the book, and a faith that the book is true. Students tend to bring this assumption with them into the classroom. So they have a hard time seeing the point of reading the books of other religions. Why should they read books they don't think are true? What is the point of their reading stories about gods in which they do not believe?

One common answer appeals to mutual understanding and respect. Reading the books of other religions helps students understand and respect other people. This is true. But approaching religious books in this way prevents us from engaging in an actual dialogue with the books. Rather than approaching the books as possible sources of truth, this approach reduces them to sources of interesting information about other people's errors and delusions.

The difficulty is especially acute in the case of Homer. When I teach Homer, students tend to ask two basic questions. My theist students ask why they should read Homer if they do not believe in the Homeric gods. And my atheist students ask why they have to read Homer if they don't believe in any gods at all. If we do not believe in the gods of a religion, how can we engage in a genuine dialogue with its books? How can we read such books as possible sources of truth?

### **Two Steps**

The first step toward an answer to this question is simple: We have to shift from the question of belief to the question of understanding. Understanding in the most basic sense is prior to belief. In order to either believe or disbelieve in a god, we have to first assume a basic understanding of who or what a god is. This basic understanding may be shared by both believers and unbelievers.

For example, theists in the Abrahamic traditions affirm the existence of God, and atheists in the Abrahamic traditions deny the existence of God, but both theists and atheists take for granted an understanding of the nature of the God whose existence they affirm or deny. Questions of understanding at this level *precede* questions of belief or unbelief. This is especially true in reading Homer, who did not "believe in" the gods in the sense that Christians believe in God. Eva Brann makes this point in her book, *Homeric Moments*: "The mode of belief or disbelief is in fact quite misapplied here. The Homeric gods are not 'believed in' in the same way that the God of Abraham requires (*Homeric Moments*, 36). So the first step is to show our students that, before we can meaningfully believe or disbelieve in the *existence* of the Homeric gods, we first have to understand the *nature* of the Homeric gods--we have to understand who or what they are.

A second step is to show that to understand Homer we have to suspend our understanding of divinity--our assumptions about the nature of the gods. If we uncritically assume an Abrahamic understanding of divinity, for example, we will never be able to take the Homeric gods seriously. A perfect example of this lack of seriousness is the article on atheism in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. The article informs us that the gods of Homer are so far from the God of Abraham that they are not really gods at all. I quote:

"Atheism" means the negation of theism, the denial of the existence of God. I shall here assume that the God in question is that of a sophisticated monotheism. The tribal gods of the early inhabitants of Palestine are of little or no philosophical interest... Similarly the Greek and Roman gods were more like mythical heroes and heroines than like the omnipotent, omniscient and good God postulated by medieval and modern philosophy.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, the gods of Homer are so ungodlike, so unworthy of being taken seriously, that there is no point even bothering to deny they exist. This is a textbook example of ethnocentric blindness. We cannot understand Homer if we uncritically take for granted an Abrahamic understanding of the divine. In order to engage in a dialogue with Homer--to approach Homer as a possible source of truth--we have to try to explicate and clarify the understanding of divinity implicit in Homer's work.

To do this we have to suspend our assumptions about the divine, and ask very simply: Who or what is a god in Homer? What for Homer is the essence of the divine?

## **The Gods in Homer**

When we first start reading Homer we are struck by something strange: Homer considers divine a number of beings that we don't consider divine at all. First, there are the supernatural beings who live on Olympus, who to us seem more human than godlike. But second, he sees as "gods" the kinds of beings that we consider natural phenomena, such as the Sun, the Moon, the Earth, and the winds. And third, he also sees as "gods" the kinds of beings that we would call psychological, such as Sleep, Dream, Persuasion, Conflict, Panic, Rout, and Grief.

Why does Homer see these beings as gods? What for Homer makes them all divine? What are the core traits that all these gods share in common?

I think the meaning of divinity, for Homer, is implicit in the epithets he gives to the gods. Homer uses three main epithets. The first epithet is that the gods are "the immortals." The second epithet is that they are "the stronger ones." And the third epithet is that the gods are "the givers of gifts." These epithets point to the three traits that for Homer are essential to divinity.

The first trait is immortality. A being is not divine unless it is immortal.

The second trait is superhuman strength. A being is divine if it is stronger than human beings, and if human beings are under its power.

The third trait is generosity. A being is divine if it gives to humans what humans cannot give to themselves. The gods are the source of our gifts and of the givens of human existence.

This is why the Sun is a god: it is immortal; it is stronger than us, and it gives us light. This is why Sleep is divine: it never dies; it's a power that overcomes us; and it gives us rest and rejuvenation. This is why Eros is a god: it has been around forever; it's a power that takes possession of us and drives us insane; and it is something we cannot summon at will, and that comes over us whether we want it to or not.

This account of the Homeric gods helps students see how the question of understanding precedes the question of belief. The challenge of Homer is not that we do not believe in the existence of the Homeric gods. Everyone believes in the existence of the Sun, and of Sleep, and of

Eros. The challenge of Homer is that he has a different understanding of divinity, and a different vision of the place of gods in human existence.

So the question is not: Do we believe that the Homeric gods exist?

Instead the question is: How does Homer understand divinity and humanity? And to what extent can we retrieve and share this understanding? What does this understanding of gods and men illuminate about human existence? How does it shed light on the world in which we live?

### **Four Dimensions of Homeric Thought**

I would argue that Homer's understanding of the gods has four distinct dimensions. At different moments he understands the gods in four distinct but related ways. There is an *explanatory* dimension of Homer's thought; there is a *descriptive* dimension; there is an *ethical* dimension of Homeric thinking. And a fourth dimension of Homeric theology I would call *contemplative*.

Let me go through these four dimension of Homer's thought one at a time.

### **The Explanatory Dimension of Homer's Thought**

The most obvious aspect of Homer's thought is the *explanatory* dimension. Homer invokes the gods to *explain* why events happen as they do. The gods in this sense are the invisible causes of otherwise inexplicable events. If something happens for no obvious human or natural reason, that happening is explained as the action of a god.

For example, at the start of *The Iliad* the Greek soldiers are dying of sickness. Why? According to Homer, it is not because their food is rotten and they are living in filth. It is because Apollo is angry that Agamemnon disrespected his priest, and the plague is Apollo's punishment.

Notice that the explanatory dimension of Homeric thought is confined to the Olympian gods. Homer describes only the Olympian gods as acting in this way--taking the initiative and intervening in human affairs.<sup>2</sup> It is true that the non-Olympian gods, such as Sleep or Dream, also intervene in human life, but they do so as *agents* of the Olympians. When Delusion comes over Agamemnon,

for example, Delusion is acting as the agent of Zeus. Likewise when Eros and Sleep come over Zeus, for example, they are merely the agents of Aphrodite and Hera. When the West Wind keeps the fleets at Aulis, it is acting on behalf of Artemis. Homer never attributes agency to anything that we would call a natural or psychological phenomenon. The Olympian gods are always the cause of anything extraordinary done by the non-Olympian gods.

Today we find it hard to take seriously this side of Homer's thought. Science offers better explanations than stories about the gods. If the Greek soldiers got sick, it was probably because they were living in filth and eating rotten food. If they blamed Apollo for their sickness, it was probably because they were scapegoating Agamemnon. Gods had nothing to do with it. At the level of explanatory thought, it seems, we understand the Greeks better than they understood themselves.

I would argue, however, that even in the explanatory dimension, Homer's theology sometimes holds insights that are worth taking seriously. But to see this we first have to understand the other dimensions of Homer's thought.

### **The Descriptive Dimension of Homer's Thought**

There is also a *descriptive* dimension to Homer's thinking about the gods. Homer uses stories of the gods to *describe* certain kinds of experience. We often have the experience of powers that come over us and overcome us, that take possession of us and alter our attunement to the world: sleep, dream, persuasion, delusion, lust, eros, inspiration, and insight. Under the influence of these powers, and in light of their presence, the world appears differently to us, and we do things that we would never do if we were not under their sway. When Homer speaks of the gods, he is sometimes merely *describing* these experiences of being subject to powers beyond our control.

The obvious example is Hypnos, which we call sleep. Sleep is a power that comes over us and overcomes us. We cannot summon it at will, but we cannot resist it for long. When we deprive ourselves of sleep the world starts to seem crummy and depressing. When we surrender to sleep, after weeks of deprivation, we wake up and the world seems wonderful again. At the start of each semester, my students have a hard time understanding how sleep could be seen as a god. But at the

end of the semester, after too many late nights, they understand that sleep is divine.

Another example is the Muse, the source of what we call "inspiration." When he speaks of the Muses, Homer is simply naming the powers that inspire great art. We cannot summon these powers at will, but we can create the conditions under which they are most likely to come over us. And when inspiration comes to us, it alters our vision and enables us to do what we could never do through willpower alone. Nietzsche gave a very precise description of this experience in *Ecce Homo*.<sup>3</sup>

A third example is Aphrodite, which we call "sexual attraction." Remember the story that Homer tells in *The Iliad* of Aphrodite coming to Helen in the person of her maid, who uses her words to arouse her desire for Paris. It is clear that the presence of Aphrodite simply stands for the power of desire. In this story we recognize a description of a universal human experience--the experience of being overwhelmed with lust for a person one does not respect or even especially like.

A last example is Athena, the name Homer gives to what we call skill or insight. Think of the time when Athena came to Telemachus in the person of Mentis, an old friend of Odysseus. The words of Mentis ignited a moment of clarity for Telemachus, who suddenly saw himself and his situation in a new light: "[S]he left in his spirit determination and courage, and he remembered his father even more than he had before, and he guessed the meaning, and his heart was full of wonder, for he thought it was a divinity" (1: 320-323).

This descriptive dimension of Homer's thought has nothing supernatural about it.<sup>4</sup> Each of these stories of the gods simply describes a common and recognizable human experience--the experience of being overcome by and under the influence of powers beyond our control. Homeric theology illuminates this part of human existence as much today as it did thousands of years ago.

### **The Ethical Dimension of Homer's Thought**

There is also an *ethical* dimension to Homer's vision of the gods. The ethical significance of Homeric theology is hard to see, because the gods do things that are obviously immoral. And not

just immoral according to our moral code, but immoral according to the morality of Homer himself: Aphrodite cheats on her husband; Hera lies to Zeus; Athena deceives Pandarus. The Homeric gods are not morally perfect; if anything they are bad role models for human beings.

But while they are ambiguous with respect to moral behavior, the Olympian gods are superlative with respect to human excellence. Their home on Olympus, the highest mountain in Greece, implies that they are "higher" than the other gods, that is, greater in virtue, honor, and blessings. Each Olympian god exemplifies the highest virtues proper to a specific domain of human existence. Athena exemplifies superlative wisdom. Aphrodite exemplifies superlative beauty. Hephaistos exemplifies superlative craftsmanship. Hera exemplifies superlative sovereignty within the domestic sphere. Together the Olympian gods embody a vision of human life at its highest.

This dimension of Homer's thought is both strange and familiar. It is strange since Homer obviously values moral rectitude less than excellence. For Homer the highest thing that humans can aspire to is not righteousness but greatness--doing or being something better than anyone else: a great warrior; a great athlete; a great beauty; a great poet. But this side of Homer's thought is also familiar because many people still live by Homer's values: they have a code of morals, but the focus and meaning of their lives is in their aspiration to greatness. Today this aspect of our lives is largely obscured by the language of the Abrahamic tradition, which values righteousness over excellence. Homer's theology is relevant today because it illuminates and clarifies this aspiration to greatness.

Homeric theology also helps to clarify the meaning of devotion. Homer clearly understood that human beings cannot achieve greatness through willpower alone. In order to do or be something better than anyone else, we need the gifts of the gods: talent, charisma, inspiration, the surge of skill and strength that athletes call "flow." We cannot give these powers to ourselves. We cannot summon the gods at will. But if we devote ourselves to something we love--family, craftsmanship, music, erotics, or wisdom--if give ourselves to it, if we arrange our lives around it, if we cultivate its virtues and engage in its practices, we can create the conditions under which it is most likely that a god will come over us. A musician cannot summon inspiration at will, but if he devotes his life to music, then inspiration is more likely to come. An athlete cannot choose to be in the

flow, but if she devotes herself to a sport then moments will come when she effortlessly performs at the highest level. A philosopher cannot make herself wise, but if she devotes her life to the search for wisdom then at times wisdom may come as if of its own accord. To be devoted to a god is to cultivate the conditions under which the god may come over you. To achieve greatness, we each have to sense what we love most, what inspires and enthuses us, and we have to choose it and devote ourselves to it with an undivided heart.

The ethical dimension of Homer's thought is illuminating in another way. Each of the Olympian gods exemplifies the good proper to a distinct domain of human existence. All the Olympian gods are equal--no god or goddess is higher than the others. And the gods sometimes come in conflict with each other. If we take the descriptive dimension of Homer's thought seriously, this means that to be human is to be drawn towards a plurality of goods, which are all equal, but which may come into conflict with each other. Erotic love is good, marriage is good, wisdom is good, but these three goods are not necessarily conducive to one another. At the deepest level of his thought, Homer offers us a vision of human life: to be human is to be drawn toward and torn between a plurality of goods.

I think this vision of human existence is implicit in the myth of the judgment of Paris. Three goddesses--Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite--each claimed to be the most beautiful, and asked Paris to judge between them. Each offered Paris gifts: Hera offered power; Athena offered wisdom; Aphrodite offered him beauty. Later, when Helen met Paris she had to make the same choice: she could choose domestic life (Hera) and wisdom (Athena); or she could choose to leave her family and elope with a beautiful stranger (Aphrodite). Her choice mirrored the choice made by Paris when he judged the three goddesses. The story says: to be human is to have to choose between different and conflicting goods.

At this point we can now see more clearly the explanatory dimension of Homer's thought. Since the story of the judgment of Paris is about the *causes* of the Trojan War, it is also part of the explanatory dimension of Homer's thought. The story explains the origins of the war, not in a pseudo-scientific way, but in a mythical way. It says the Trojan War started because humans and

gods tried to exclude Eris, the goddess of conflict or strife, from the wedding of Peleus and Thetis. Eris came to the wedding anyway, took revenge for her exclusion by overcoming the gods and setting them against each other. This story is not a superstition but a myth. And the myth points to a real insight, which is that Eris, Strife or Conflict, will *not* be excluded. The myth tells us that Strife *is* a god--a power to humans are subject, and which we fail to recognize at our peril. If we try to exclude conflict from our lives--if we don't make a place for conflict--then conflict will overcome and destroy us.

### **The Contemplative Dimension of Homer's Thought**

There is a fourth side to Homer's discourse on the gods. Homer often shows the gods on Olympus contemplating human life. The classic example occurs in Book 17 of the *Iliad*, when Zeus looks down the immortal horses that belong to Achilles, and the warriors fighting over the dead body of Patroclus. Zeus says to the horses:

Poor wretches, why then did we ever give you to the lord Peleus, a mortal man, and you yourselves are immortal and ageless? Only so that among unhappy men you also might be grieved? Since among all creatures that breathe on earth and crawl on it there is not anywhere a thing more dismal than man is (17: 442-447)

By telling a human story from the perspective of the gods, Homer invites us to imaginatively put ourselves in their place, to contemplate human existence as though from above and outside human life, to see our ephemeral lives from the perspective of eternity.<sup>5</sup>

Goethe recognized the contemplative dimension of Homer in a letter he wrote to Schiller in 1798. He wrote:

Your letter found me...in the *Iliad*, to which I always return with delight. It is always as if one were in a balloon, far above everything earthly; as if one were truly in that intermediate zone where the gods float hither and thither. (Hadot, *PWL* 238)

The *Iliad* has the power to raise us above everyday life and let us contemplate human existence as though from above and from the outside. In his book, *Poetry and Truth*, Goethe wrote that this power is essential to all true poetry.

True poetry can be recognized by the fact that, like a secular Gospel, through the

inner cheerfulness and outward pleasure it procures us, it can free us from the mundane burdens which weigh upon us. Like a hot-air balloon, it lifts us up into higher regions, along with the ballast that clings to us, and lets us see, from a birds-eye-view, the mad labyrinths of the world spread out before us. (Hadot, *PWL* 239)

I think that Goethe here is only half right. It is true that the *Iliad* lifts us up and lets us contemplate human life as though from Olympus. But it also shows us the world from the perspective of Achilles, who knows he has only a few more weeks to live. The emotional power of the poem comes from this stark juxtaposition of perspectives, so that it lets us see the world from the perspective of eternity and from the perspective of men on the threshold of death.

### **Conclusion**

Let me conclude with my original question: How to teach religious texts in a liberal arts classroom? How can we approach texts from other religious traditions as possible sources of insight?

My answer is that we have to take two steps. First, we have to shift our focus from questions of belief to questions of understanding. Second, we have to suspend our inherited understanding of the divine, and to be open to radically different views about the meaning of divinity. If we approach Homer in this way, we find that his theology illuminates human life in a number of ways.

First, Homer's *descriptions* of divine possession illuminate a kind of human experience--the experience of being overcome by powers that exceed our control, in whose light the world appears differently to us, and under whose influence we act in ways we would never act on our own.

Second, Homer's stories of the gods convey not just a general ethos but a number of specific ethical insights. They illuminate the aspiration to greatness, our inability to reach greatness through our efforts alone, the meaning of devotion, and the tragic necessity of having to decide what to devote ourselves to. These insights belong to an ethos that illuminates a condition of human existence--that to be human means to be drawn toward and torn between a plurality of equal but conflicting goods.

Third, the figures of the Olympian gods articulate the power of human self-transcendence--our power to see human life as though from outside and above, from the perspective of eternity, and also to see life as though from the end of life and the threshold of death.

By shifting our focus from questions of belief to questions of understanding, by suspending our assumptions about the meaning of divinity, by opening ourselves to and making our own a different understanding of divinity, we can approach religious texts from other traditions as partners in a genuine dialogue, that is, as sources of genuine self-understanding and truth.

## Notes

1. Smart, J. J. C., "Atheism and Agnosticism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2013/entries/atheism-agnosticism/>.
2. A non-Olympian god in Homer hardly ever acts on his or her own initiative. One exception is when Odysseus swims ashore in the *Odyssey* and the river listens to him. So the non-Olympian god can sometimes have some kind of agency. Eris, or Strife, is also an exception, one that, I would argue, proves the rule.
3. Nietzsche writes, "Has anyone at the end of the nineteenth century a distinct conception of what poets of strong ages called *inspiration*?... The concept of revelation, in the sense that something suddenly, with unspeakable certainty and subtlety, becomes *visible*, audible, something that shakes and overturns one to the depths, simply describes the fact. One hears, one does not seek; one takes, one does not ask who gives; a thought flashes up like lightning, with necessity, unfalteringly formed" (*Ecce Homo*, p. 72).
4. Eva Brann similarly argues, "*nothing* is ever done that could not have been done by the humans themselves" (*Homeric Moments*, 43).
5. See also Book 1: 498-499, Book 5: 753-754, and Book 11: 79-83.

## Secondary Sources

Eva Brann, *Homeric Moments: Clues to Delight in Reading the Odyssey and the Iliad* (2002)  
Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion* (1985)  
Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Kelly, *All Things Shining* (2011)  
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, as quoted in Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (1995)  
Gregory Nagy, *The Ancient Greek Hero: In 24 Hours* (2013)  
Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*  
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Jean-Pierre Vernant, *The Universe, the Gods, and Men* (1999)