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Walter Burkert: Classical scholar whose fascinating books on Greek mythology and religion were packed with fresh insight

Combined awesome learning with a passionate intellectual curiosity

ROBERT PARKER | Sunday 31 May 2015



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Walter Burkert was a giant among scholars of ancient Greek culture, one whose work had resonance well beyond the world of classical scholarship. He combined awesome learning, brilliant expository skills in both German and English (the award in 2003 of the Sigmund Freud prize for Scientific Prose was well deserved), and a passionate and wide-ranging intellectual curiosity.

His love and admiration for Greek literature and philosophy were manifest, but his approach to the Greek world was resolutely non-classicising and non-idealising. He always sought out interconnections with the thought and experience of other ancient cultures (an early article was entitled "Iranian Elements in Anaximander"). More controversially, he believed Greek religious practices to have been decisively shaped by homo sapiens' long prehistory as a hunter, and even sought analogies in animal behaviour.

His first major book treated the philosopher and sage Pythagoras. With virtuoso scholarship he illuminated the growth of traditions about this early figure who left no writings. What remained in Burkert's account, once these later accretions had been stripped away, was an archaic sage, more wonderworker than scientist.

The next book was a study of Greek sacrifice entitled *Homo Necans* ("Man the Killer"), in grim parody of Johan Huizinga's study of the play element in culture, *Homo Ludens*. The Swiss comparatist Karl Meuli had argued that Greek sacrificial ritual had its origin in the "comedy of innocence", by which hunters pretended that the killing of their prey was not their fault or indeed had not happened at all. Burkert combined this idea with the then-popular theories of students of animal behaviour, Konrad Lorenz above all, about the inherent aggressivity of animals and men.

Sacrifice for Burkert was a mechanism that both discharged human aggression against an animal and (by the Meuli mechanism) sought guiltily to deny its reality. The shared experience of sacred horror grounded society. Like Jane Harrison, whom he admired, he looked past the facade of the stylish Olympian gods to see in Greek religion something primitive and visceral: "Werewolves around the Tripod Kettle" was a typical chapter title.

Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual reformulated this position in polite polemic against the other innovative, and much more intellectualist, approach of the time, the structuralism of Levi-Strauss and J.P. Vernant: "History



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Against Structure” might have caught its argument more accurately.

A large history of Greek religion published in 1977 was at once recognised as a masterpiece of learning and compression, and brought back to the fore the theme of Greek dependence on other ancient near-eastern cultures that dominated his writing thenceforth – and set the agenda for some of the most innovative work by others of the last three decades.

Burkert learnt the extinct east Semitic language Akkadian, and in the short but brilliant *The Orientalizing Revolution* argued that Greeks borrowed from the neighbouring cultures in religion, poetry and cosmology no less than in art; he anticipated Bernal’s *Black Athena* in identifying the racism underlying some 19th-century attempts to prove the opposite, while avoiding that work’s many excesses.

His theoretical boldness was recognised by the invitation to deliver the Gifford lectures in *Natural Theology* in 1989. There emerged *Creation of the Sacred: Tracks of Biology in Early Religions*, which sought to ground forms of action common to many religions (such as sacrifice, expiation, scapegoating, offerings, myth-making) in biological imperatives.

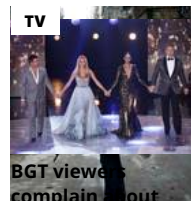
The index sequence “children, sacrifice of; chimpanzees; Christianity” is rather characteristic of the book. As “early religions” in the sub-title suggests, it’s a throwback to the big theories about the origins of religion advanced by the founding fathers of anthropology in the 19th century, but abandoned with the rise of the field-based British tradition in the 20th. When published it was isolated; since then, the cognitive science of religion has set itself the same ambitious goal.

Other books include *Ancient Mystery Cults*, a dense but vivid synthesis which stressed the drastic experience of initiation (as opposed to promises about the afterlife), and *Babylon, Memphis, Persepolis: Eastern Contexts of Greek Culture*, a study in the exchange of cosmological ideas. His *Kleine Schriften* extend to an astonishing eight volumes, and contain much of his best work.

Like several recent scholars of Greek religion, he grew up in a very different religious environment, as the son of a Lutheran minister in southern Germany. For most of his career he taught at the university of Zürich as professor of Greek. With his tall and slightly stooped figure, he was a courteous and benevolent presence at every conference where Greek religion was discussed, attending closely to the contributions of both young and old, and summarising the whole discussion with effortless skill at the end.

Not given to small talk, he became instantly animated when any topic with which a mind could engage was mentioned. His books were widely translated, he held almost all the prestigious visiting lecturerships, and had honours showered upon him – chief among them, the Balzan Prize for 1990. He valued such things at no more than they are worth.

Walter Burkert, scholar: born Neuendettelsau, Germany 2 February 1931; died Zurich, Switzerland 11 March 2015.



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