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Belief in Belief and Divine Kingship in Early Ptolemaic Egypt: The Case of Ptolemy II Philadelphus and Arsinoe II

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“I never cease to wonder, in dialogues with such people,
whether they are really saying what they mean
or meaning what they say.”

*Christopher Hitchens*¹

In his recent book, *Coping with the Gods: Wayward Readings in Greek Theology* (2011), Henk Versnel dedicates the sixth and last chapter to a question that for many years has bedeviled historians of religion that deal with the Graeco-Roman world: *Did the Greeks believe in the divinity of their rulers?* The conquests of Alexander the Great created a new political status quo rather innovative for the traditional Greek conception of political administration. The emergence and consolidation of kingship as the ideal and dominant form of government, which Alexander established following the political traditions of the east, maintained its legitimacy after his death and was adopted by his successors, who inherited and segmented the vast empire. Kingship would constitute the only acceptable form of political rule for centuries to come. Following Alexander’s example, these monarchs were eventually deified. But did this deification of kings actually have an impact on the religious life of the people? Did this deification generate religious belief? Versnel’s question lies at the core of the problematic nature of these religio/political developments, which were rapidly spreading in all the newly formulated kingdoms of the post-Alexander era. Egypt constituted the most significant Hellenistic kingdom, where divine honors were offered to the Ptolemies, the dynasty that ruled Egypt from Alexander’s death to the coming of Rome.

* I would like to thank Luther H. Martin, Panayotis Pachis, and Gerhard van den Heever for their very helpful comments on an earlier draft as well as the two anonymous reviewers and the managing editor of *Religio* for their suggestions.

1 Christopher Hitchens, “Belief in Belief”, *Council for Secular Humanism* [online], <<http://old.richarddawkins.net/articles/2190-belief-in-belief>>, [15 May 2014].

The very term ‘belief’ has raised a long debate among religious studies scholars regarding its application in the pre-Christian Greek world. Eminent scholars such as Rodney Needham and Wilfred Cantwell Smith have argued that the concept of belief should not be applied to pre-Christian religious traditions since it constitutes a term that is “profoundly Christian in its implications”.² In addition, Simon Price has pointed out the problems that emerge when one adopts the notion in the pre-Christian Greek religious world – a world that was in essence ritual-based and did not possess any sacred books, dogma, clergy, church, et cetera.³ John Gould has discussed this position in detail along with the suggestion to dismiss the term ‘belief’ from the study of Greek religion. Drawing from the known indictment against Socrates, which states that he “is a wrongdoer because he corrupts the youth and does not *believe in the gods the state believes in*, but in other new spiritual beings”,⁴ Gould argues that the phrase “*theous nomizein*, means not ‘believe in the gods’, but ‘acknowledge’ them. That is, pray to them, sacrifice to them, build them temples, make them the object of cult and ritual”.⁵ It is not my intention here to delve into the long debate of the meaning of the term ‘belief’ based on this oft quoted passage from Plato.⁶ The verb *nomizo* holds various connotations in Greek, among which is ‘to deem’ or ‘to consider’, but also ‘to believe’.⁷ The problem is clearly outlined by Smith: “What has it meant to believe? What has it been meaning, to various people, religious and secu-

2 Henk Versnel, *Coping with the Gods: Wayward Readings in Greek Theology*, (Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 173), Leiden–Boston: Brill 2011, 539. Also, see Rodney Needham, *Belief, Language, and Experience*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1973; Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Believing: An Historical Perspective*, Oxford: Oneworld 1998 (first ed. 1977).

3 Simon R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1984.

4 Plato, *Apology* 24b-c, emphasis added.

5 John Gould, “On Making Sense of Greek Religion”, in: Patricia E. Easterling–John V. Muir (eds.), *Greek Religion and Society*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1985, 1-33: 7.

6 The translation is drawn from Harold North Fowler, *Plato: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo, Phaedrus*, (Loeb Classical Library), Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1947 (first ed. 1914). The problematic nature of the meaning of the verb *nomizein* can be seen in the two different translations employed in Paul A. Miller–Charles Platter, *Plato’s Apology of Socrates: A Commentary*, Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press 2010. In their introduction the two authors provide the following translation: “Socrates does wrong, both because he corrupts the youth, and because he does not *recognize* the gods the city recognizes” (*ibid.*, 5); in their commentary, on the other hand, we read: “not *honoring* the gods the city honors” (*ibid.*, 63; emphases added). Also, see the very interesting article by Manuela Giordano-Zecharya, “As Socrates Shows, the Athenians Did Not Believe in Gods”, *Numen* 52/3, 2005, 325-355.

7 Henry G. Liddell–Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1996, 1179.

lar; various groups; various centuries? We shall here attempt to answer this for the English-speaking world from early modern times.”⁸ The emphasis here underlies something that is often not taken into consideration: the usage of a term in one language does not automatically imply that solely the same connotation(s) applies in a different language, let alone in a language that belongs to an ancient culture.⁹ Religious belief should not be dismissed from our research vocabularies when we deal with ancient Greek religion.¹⁰ Versnel argues that to abstract the term ‘belief’ from Greek religion is “intrinsically absurd” precisely because the term is not an exclusive privilege of the Christian creed, and such a practice is nothing more “than an instance of modern Christian bias”.¹¹

8 W. C. Smith, *Believing...*, 40 (emphasis added).

9 The matter of translation has preoccupied ethnographers for years. Benson Saler has shown that no matter how well someone has mastered a language other than her/his own in order to study the beliefs of a given culture, there will always be general problems regarding elements of that particular language through which those beliefs are expressed. See Benson Saler, “On What We May Believe About Beliefs”, in: Benson Saler, *Understanding Religion: Selected Essays*, Berlin–New York: Walter de Gruyter 2009, 95–115: 108. The Greek verb *nomizein* constitutes one of those problematic native words.

10 I agree with Donald Wiebe’s criticism of Smith’s work. As he puts it, “it is impossible to write an adequate ‘history of religion(s)’, or to undertake a ‘comparative study of religion’ without use of the concept (category) of belief” (Donald Wiebe, “The Role of ‘Belief’ in the Study of Religion: A Response to W. C. Smith”, *Numen* 26/2, 1979, 234–249: 235). The writing of a history of religion(s) could argue against the usage of the concept ‘belief’ only when direct contact with that religion is possible – that is, it is a new religion; its history can be easily accessed and its followers can be interviewed. But to exclude this category from the writing or the study of a history of a long-dead religion virtually leaves us with nothing at hand. In addition, to claim that belief did not exist in a past culture, with no direct references at our disposal, only turns a speculation into a fact. I think that ancient Greek practices such as sacrifices, rituals, processions, temple establishments, et cetera were results of a religious belief that motivated people to act this way.

11 H. Versnel, *Coping with the Gods...*, 554. Luis Ruprecht’s remarks in the preface of his book *Was Greek Thought Religious?* recapitulate the whole issue in an excellent way: “‘Was Greek thought to be religious?’ The answer to that vexing question is ‘yes and no’, ‘to varying degrees’, and ‘it depends on when we’re talking about’. But it was only in the modern period that the question was ask-able in something like our present terms. Greek thought may well have been secularized, and sanitized, by Enlightenment scholars who needed Greece to serve as a beacon signaling their own kind of secular and democratic homecoming. So much so that, even when we deal with Greece’s most prominent religious institutions – like her temples – we tend to view them as if they were not. That is the paradox I am interested in examining, the ways in which we have been blinded to the Greeks’ vast difference from us, the ways in which we have been blinded to the Greeks’ enduring religiosity” (Luis A. Ruprecht, *Was Greek Thought Religious? On the Use and Abuse of Hellenism from Rome to Romanticism*, New York: Palgrave 2002, xxiii).

In the following pages I will take Ptolemy II and his sister/wife Arsinoe II as a case of study in order to present one of the clearest examples of the deification of kings during this period. This royal couple constituted the main political figures of Ptolemaic Egypt around which the idea of divine kingship was developed and the dynastic and ruler cults were established.¹² Versnel's question remains: Did the people actually believe in the divinity of their rulers? In presenting the significant role played by rituals and festivals associated with the two potentates during this period, I will argue that Daniel Dennett's notion of *belief in belief*¹³ can provide a theoretical framework for the study of divine kingship during the Hellenistic era, as portrayed in Egypt at the time of Ptolemy II. This position occupies the space between two prevalent opinions among historians of religion: one that argues that there was no real religious aspect in these practices but solely a political agenda and should be studied accordingly; and another that sees the deification of the monarchs as a religious phenomenon that implied belief in their divine nature.¹⁴ Political or religious, as I will argue, the practice of the deification of kings did not generate religious belief *per se* but rather *belief in the belief* in the divinity of the rulers.

Before proceeding, however, one issue needs to be addressed. The practice of deification, either *ante* or *post mortem*, was not only evident in Ptolemaic Egypt (or solely during the reign of Ptolemy II) but constituted a common theme encountered in virtually all Hellenistic kingdoms. The phenomenon prevailed during the Roman era, where a clearer example can be seen with the deification of the Emperor. In a seemingly similar paper to this one, Aleš Chalupa is preoccupied with the question of the nature of the divine emperor and whether he was deemed "ontologically different from any other people living in his days" or whether what is at stake here is simply the issue of relative divinity as argued by Ittai Gradel.¹⁵ Chalupa argues that both concepts are problematic and that we would be better off

12 This choice is not accidental. Besides the available sources that allow for further reflection, Ptolemy II was the first Hellenistic potentate to add his own name into the catalogue of divine kings. In contrast to civic ruler-cults established by cities and dynastic cults established in honor of deceased members of a dynasty by their descendants, Ptolemy II constitutes the best Hellenistic example of a living king that proclaimed his own divinity. For a general discussion, see Graham Shipley, *The Greek World after Alexander 323-30 BC*, London–New York: Routledge 2000, 157-160; Angelos Chaniotis, "The Divinity of Hellenistic Rulers", in: Andrew Erskine (ed.), *A Companion to the Hellenistic World*, Malden, MA–Oxford: Blackwell 2005, 431-445: 436-437.

13 Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, New York: Penguin 2006.

14 For example, see Frank Walbank, *The Hellenistic World*, Sussex: Harvester Press 1981, 217.

15 See Aleš Chalupa, "Roman Emperors: Gods, Men, Something Between Or An Unnecessary Dilemma?", *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* 15/2, 2007, 257-270: 262;

if we simply concentrated on the ritual aspect of such phenomena rather than attempting to answer the problem of how the divinized emperors were conceived by the Romans themselves. In his view, the right strategy would be to “abandon this doubtful study of beliefs Romans have had about their emperors (an ideological part of Roman imperial cult) and, instead, reorientate our attention to the study of its ritual components”.¹⁶

While I share Chalupa’s and Gradel’s reservations, in what follows I wish to argue that abandoning the study of the beliefs that people might have had about their potentates does not, at the same time, prohibit us from studying or applying a second-order concept, such as *belief in belief*, in order to examine why such practices enjoyed broad acceptance and were widely celebrated in antiquity. In addition, the Roman phenomenon of apotheosis is not identical to the Ptolemaic practices that were certainly influenced by both Egyptian and eastern traditions. The response to such phenomena in that part of the Mediterranean basin cannot be seen as identical to the reactions of Greeks and Romans to *prima facie* similar phenomena within their own cultural contexts. Even if one wishes to accept what Robertson Smith argued many years ago regarding rituals preceding doctrinal theory¹⁷ and, thus, concentrate solely on what those rituals offered to their practitioners, I am inclined to accept that people – ancient and modern alike – do not engage in rituals without a certain dogma that makes sense to them.¹⁸ Whether they wholeheartedly embrace the dogma (belief) or simply prefer to accept it because they deem it functional and profitable (belief in belief) will be discussed in the remaining parts of the paper.

From Ptolemy II to *theoi adelphoi*

Egypt constitutes the best example of a Hellenistic kingdom that adopted and promoted the institution of deified kings. Erich Gruen’s assertion is crucial when one studies the nature of kingship in the kingdoms that emerged after the death of Alexander the Great: “[T]wo basic problems confronted Greek kings: the fact that they were Greek and the fact that they were kings. The first presented a challenge to their control of non-Hellenic peoples, the second complicated their relations with Hellenic

Ittai Gradel, *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 2002, 29.

16 A. Chalupa, “Roman Emperors...”, 266.

17 William Robertson Smith, *Religion of the Semites*, New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 2000 (first ed. 1894), xliv, 17-18.

18 See above, footnote 10.

traditions.”¹⁹ Yet somehow this position loses its general applicability when we turn our attention to the Ptolemaic kingdom. Egypt had a long history of pharaonic rule and the transition to the Ptolemaic reign did not actually trigger the same reactions nor did it create similar problems as in other kingdoms of the former vast Macedonian empire. The land of the Nile was indeed “the most subject to monarchic rule”.²⁰ This was clearly manifested already when Alexander freed Egypt in 332 BCE and was welcomed in raptures of enthusiasm by the people of Egypt. According to tradition, he was officially enthroned as Pharaoh and is mentioned in Egyptian texts with pharaonic titles such as son of Ammun-Ra, while he himself showed great respect for the local traditions.²¹

After Alexander’s death, the kingdom of Egypt came under the rule of Ptolemy I.²² As early as 290 BCE, Ptolemy established a cult for Alexander while he himself received the epithet Savior (*Soter*), which opened the way to the attribution of similar epithets to the Ptolemaic royal family.²³ The epithets that accompany both the Ptolemies and their queens indicate the ease with which the rulers of the Egyptian kingdom were acknowledged as superiors among humans: Ptolemy I Soter (Savior); Ptolemy II Philadelphus (Sister-Loving); Ptolemy III Euergetes (Benefactor); Ptolemy IV Philopator (Father-Loving); Ptolemy V Epiphanes (the Manifested One). This superiority was closely related to the epithets Soter, Epiphanes, and Euergetes, which were also ascribed to a number of deities.²⁴ Ptolemy I Soter died in

19 Erich S. Gruen, “Introduction”, in: Anthony W. Bulloch–Erich S. Gruen–Anthony A. Long–Andrew Stewart (eds.), *Images and Ideologies: Self-Definition in the Hellenistic World*, Berkeley–London: University of California Press 1993, 3-6: 4.

20 Dorothy J. Thompson, “The Ptolemies and Egypt”, in: Andrew Erskine (ed.), *A Companion to the Hellenistic World*, Malden, MA–Oxford: Blackwell 2005, 105-120: 113. Also see G. Shipley, *The Greek World after Alexander...*, 160.

21 See C. Bradford Welles, “Alexander’s Historical Achievement”, *Greece and Rome* 12/2, 1965, 216-228: 222; Arnold H. M. Jones, “The Hellenistic Age”, *Past and Present* 27, 1964, 3-22: 15-16.

22 On Ptolemy I, see Walter M. Ellis, *Ptolemy of Egypt*, London–New York: Routledge 1994.

23 The name Savior was given to Ptolemy by the people of Rhodes for his help against the Antigonid attack in 305 BCE. See Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 1.8.6.

24 On the epithets of the members of the Ptolemaic dynasty (and on similar adjectives assigned to members of the dynasties of the other Hellenistic kingdoms), see Ludwig Koenen, “The Ptolemaic King as a Religious Figure”, in: Anthony W. Bulloch–Erich S. Gruen–Anthony A. Long–Andrew Stewart (eds.), *Images and Ideologies: Self-Definition in the Hellenistic World*, Berkeley–London: University of California Press 1993, 25-115: 61-66; D. Thompson, “The Ptolemies and Egypt...”, 113; Hans-Josef Klauck, *The Religious Context of Early Christianity: A Guide to Graeco-Roman Religions*, trans. Brian McNeil, Edinburgh: T&T Clark 2000, 275; François Chamoux, *Hellenistic Civilization*, trans. Michel Roussel, Malden, MA–Oxford: Blackwell 2002, 228; A. Chaniotis, “The Divinity of Hellenistic Rulers...”, 433.

283 BCE and was succeeded by his son, Ptolemy II. The new potentate declared his father a god and in 279 BCE, when his mother Berenice died, he established a joint cult for his parents, known as *Ptolemaieia*, a four-yearly festival in their honor; from that moment on, his deceased parents would be known as Savior Gods (*theoi soterēs*).²⁵ This constituted the first establishment of a cult honoring deceased kings as gods. Ptolemy II received the epithet Philadelphus after marrying his sister, Arsinoe II. But what followed was the most important step towards establishing something indeed innovative: Ptolemy II added himself and his queen (probably around 272-271 BCE) to the cult of Alexander, which was established by Ptolemy I Soter; thus, for the first time, the cult of deified *living* kings was introduced, as the name of the cult, *theoi adelphoi* (brother-sister gods), denotes.²⁶

The marriage of Ptolemy II and Arsinoe II played a decisive role in opening the way for the establishment of their joint cult while they were both still alive. Marriages between brothers and sisters were not unknown among the gods (both Egyptian and Greek). Isis, the most prominent deity of Egypt, was married to her brother Osiris, while Zeus was married to his sister Hera on Mount Olympus. The third-century-BCE Greek poet Theocritus quickly adopted this relationship in his seventeenth *Idyll*: “No finer woman [Arsinoe II] ever embraced her husband in his palace. Or gave such heartfelt love to the man who is at once husband and brother. In the same way were the sacred marriages of the gods arranged. Those whom Queen Rhea bore to be rulers of Olympus; Zeus and Hera share one bed” (Theocritus, *Idyll* 17.129-134).²⁷ Arsinoe herself probably played a key role in the establishment of this cult. She was a woman of great intelligence and ambition that exceeded even Ptolemy’s political aspirations. In general, Arsinoe is deemed as the most important female figure of this period, surpassing even the famous Cleopatra.²⁸ One may easily discern

25 See F. Walbank, *The Hellenistic World...*, 213; Frank W. Walbank, “Monarchies and Monarchic Ideas”, in: F. W. Walbank–A. E. Austin–M. W. Frederiksen–R. M. Ogilvie (eds.), *The Cambridge Ancient History VII/1: The Hellenistic World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1984, 62-100: 97; H.-J. Klauck, *The Religious Context of Early Christianity...*, 278; Kateljij Vandorpe, “The Ptolemaic Period”, in: Alan B. Lloyd (ed.), *A Companion to Ancient Egypt*, Malden, MA–Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell 2010, 159-179: 163.

26 F. Walbank, “Monarchies and Monarchic Ideas...”, 97.

27 On Theocritus and his work, see Richard Hunter, *Theocritus and the Archaeology of Greek Poetry*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996; on the *Idyll* praising Ptolemy II, see Richard Hunter, *Encomium of Ptolemy Philadelphus*, Berkeley–London: University of California Press 2003.

28 Arsinoe’s role in the life of Ptolemaic Egypt has no equivalent in the Hellenistic period. No other queen managed to do so much: she became involved in a series of conspiracies and political games; became more popular than the king himself; and acquired

the political significance of this new cult, which elevated the royal couple to the divine sphere, thus further cementing their political power, and this situation should not be treated as something spontaneous or with little or no prior planning.²⁹ There was a long tradition considering each Pharaoh as a son of god and, obviously, it was easy for Ptolemy II and Arsinoe to adopt such a tradition in the light of the known divine incestuous marriage between Isis and Osiris. After all, such an adoption would not have triggered extreme reactions from the Greeks of Egypt – who, in general, thought such practices to be a disgrace but who were already familiar by then with Egyptian traditions as well as with the Zeus/Hera example – and, certainly, it would not have seemed outrageous to the Egyptians. As Ludwig Koenen has pointed out, “the king is officially seen as double-faced, the one face directed toward his Macedonian and Greek subjects and the other, the pharaonic head, toward the Egyptians”.³⁰ This suggests that every King/Pharaoh of Egypt during this period had to deal with both categories of subjects in order to maintain a balance and to continue holding power in his hands.³¹

If Theocritus’ *Idyll* 17 seems more like a case of flattery than an explicit indication of an actual deification of Ptolemy II and Arsinoe II, the text of *P. Hib.* 38 is more straightforward in this regard.³² The text is about the sinking of a Nile ship, where we find a declaration that the facts mentioned in the papyrus are true and are confirmed by the writer through a royal oath. The oath is taken in the name of King Ptolemy and Arsinoe

such popularity that her cults were alive even a century after her death not only in Egypt but in many other places of the Hellenistic world. Even though many queens of the Ptolemaic dynasty established themselves in the political and religious life of Egypt, Arsinoe II was by far the most prominent one. Grace H. Macurdy, *Hellenistic Queens: A Study of Woman-Power in Macedonia, Seleucid Syria, and Ptolemaic Egypt*, Chicago: Ares Publishers 1932, especially 111-130, remains an excellent study and a good starting point. Also see K. Vandorpe, “The Ptolemaic Period...”, 163-164; 169; A. Chaniotis, “The Divinity of Hellenistic Rulers...”, 442; D. Thompson, “The Ptolemies and Egypt...”, 114-115.

29 The establishment of royal and dynastic cults, along with the circulation of coins depicting the ruler(s) as superhuman or demigod, has been seen as an unsystematic attempt that lacked both previous experience and good arrangements. For example, see R. A. Hadley, “Royal Propaganda of Seleucus I and Lysimachus”, *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 94, 1974, 50-65: 51.

30 L. Koenen, “The Ptolemaic King as a Religious Figure...”, 25-26.

31 See the works by Joseph G. Manning, *The Last Pharaohs: Egypt Under the Ptolemies, 305-30 BC*, Princeton–Oxford: Princeton University Press 2010; and Susan A. Stephens, *Seeing Double: Intercultural Poetics in Ptolemaic Alexandria*, Berkeley – London: University of California Press 2003.

32 The Hibeh Papyri were obtained in 1902 from the Ptolemaic necropolis of El-Hibeh; they belong to the third century BCE (with the exception of papyrus no. 23).

Philadelphus, brother and sister gods, as well as their parents, Savior Gods (i.e., Ptolemy I Soter and Berenice):

I swear by King Ptolemy and
Arsinoe Philadelphus, gods Adelphi,
and by the gods Soteres their
parents, that the aforesaid statements are correct.³³

Besides acknowledging the divine nature of the royal couple, this papyrus also shows that people were willing to take oaths and to accept and declare the members of the royal family to be divine. This contradicts the conventional idea that the process of deification followed a vertical top-down path, i.e., it was initiated and imposed solely by the ruler and his palace.³⁴ Testimony coming from Diodorus Siculus regarding the proclamation of Ptolemy I as Soter is illustrative of the bottom-up initiation of the deification process. After Ptolemy's help to the Rhodians, the latter sent representatives of the city to the oracle of Ammun in the Libyan Desert in order to ask whether they should honor Ptolemy I as a god. The oracle's affirmative response led to the dedication of a sanctuary in honor of the ruler of Egypt in the city of Rhodes, called the *Ptolemaion*.³⁵ This kind of honor towards a ruler was a response to his benefaction, help, and protection; the king was happy to accept such acts of loyalty and admiration for obvious reasons.

The motives for such innovative acts can be determined. As the Romanian political scientist Lucian Leustean argues, "there is a thin line between religion and politics, when we consider that both disciplines deal with the exercise of power ... and analyzing the relationship between them is not an easy task".³⁶ The Greeks deemed power and immortality as the hallmarks of a divinity. As Albert Heinrichs puts it, immortality consti-

33 The translation is drawn from Bernard P. Grenfell–Arthur S. Hunt, *The Hibeh Papyrus I*, London: The Egypt Exploration Fund 1906. Also see A. E. Samuel, "The Ptolemies and the Ideology of Kingship", in: Peter Green (ed.), *Hellenistic History and Culture*, Berkeley–London: University of California Press 1993, 168-192: 181-182.

34 H. Versnel, *Coping with the Gods...*, 467.

35 Diodorus Siculus, *The Library of History* 20.100.3-4. Also see F. Walbank, *The Hellenistic World...*, 214-215. The initiatives taken by cities for the deification of their kings are not limited to Ptolemaic Egypt. For example see Klaus Bringmann, "The King as Benefactor: Some Remarks on Ideal Kingship in the Age of Hellenism", in: Anthony W. Bulloch–Erich S. Gruen–Anthony A. Long–Andrew Stewart (eds.), *Images and Ideologies: Self-Definition in the Hellenistic World*, Berkeley–London: University of California Press 1993, 7-24.

36 Lucian Leustean, "Towards an Integrative Theory of Religion and Politics", *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 17, 2005, 364-381: 365.

tuted the basic feature that distinguished humans from gods.³⁷ Even though this was the case in the archaic and classical periods, there seems to be a turn towards ‘power’ and ‘protection’ as the most important characteristics of a divinity during the Hellenistic period. In a world that experienced radical changes in every social and cultural aspect, the focus was on survival, protection, and prosperity. The kings – as Diodorus’ information portrays – started accepting divine honors precisely because the traditional gods were no longer as powerful as they used to be.³⁸ In point of fact, the ruler was doing what the gods had failed to do: protect and save the people from enemies, poverty, insecurity, starvation, and other misfortunes. In addition to the honors offered to Ptolemy I by the Rhodians, another example is the way the Athenians welcomed Demetrius Poliorketes (the Besieger) after he freed the city of Athens from Macedonian occupation.³⁹ Immortality had lost its primary position among the predicates that determined the nature of a divinity.⁴⁰ Power was the dominant indication that a god was present, and Ptolemy II Philadelphus tried to manifest his power to the inhabitants of Egypt – and mainly to his opponents.

Power and belief or believing in power

Ptolemy II organized an impressive procession that went through the streets of Alexandria in honor of his deceased father, Ptolemy I Soter. A description of this monumental procession is preserved by Athenaeus

37 See Albert Heinrichs, “What is a Greek God?”, in: Jan N. Bremmer–Andrew Erskine (eds.), *The Gods of Ancient Greece: Identities and Transformations*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2010, 19-39: 38.

38 See F. Walbank, *The Hellenistic World...*, 217; id., “Monarchies and Monarchic Ideas...”, 94.

39 “Now, know that other gods are far away or have no ears or don’t exist or do not care about us. But thee, we see here present, Not wood, nor stone, but real to the bone. To thee we send our prayer: So first of all make peace, o most beloved, For thou has the power.” The text is found in Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* 6.257f. The translation is drawn from H. Versnel, *Coping with the Gods...*, 446 (and 444-456 for an exemplary analysis of the text). Regarding the hymn and its place in the study of Graeco-Roman divine kingship, see F. Chamoux, *Hellenistic Civilization...*, 225-226; H.-J. Klauck, *The Religious Context of Early Christianity...*, 256-259. Also, see the recent essay by Angelos Chaniotis, “The Ithyphallic Hymn for Demetrius Poliorketes and Hellenistic Religious Mentality”, in: Panagiotis P. Iossif–Andrzej S. Chankowski–Catharine C. Lorber (eds.), *More than Men, Less than Gods: Studies on Royal Cult and Imperial Worship*, Leuven–Walpole, MA: Peeters 2011, 157-195. On Demetrius Poliorketes, see Jon Mikalson, *Religion in Hellenistic Athens*, Berkeley–London: University of California Press 1998, 75-104.

40 See H. Versnel, *Coping with the Gods...*, 469-470.

(*Deipnosophistae* 5.197c-203b)⁴¹ and gives us a clear view of both the royal family's wealth and its "affinity to the gods", since it "demonstrated the king's political and military supremacy".⁴² The processions in the streets of Alexandria, the capital and administrative center of the Ptolemaic kingdom, constituted part of the dynastic and ruler cults. Angelos Chaniotis has argued that these cults were following the exact same pattern as the (Greek) cults organized in honor of the gods. Thus, we find (a) rituals that revolved around (b) sacrifice; the rituals would follow (c) a procession in the city, while often they would be accompanied by (d) athletic or musical competitions, thus constituting (e) an organized festival in honor of the ruler/king.⁴³ All the above were integrated into Greek religious rituals in general, with sacrifice (*thusia*) being the indispensable element of worship.⁴⁴ Ruler and dynastic cults followed the traditional pattern in order to show the connection between gods and rulers. But processions played a specific role in such cults. As Jan Bremmer puts it, "processions were particularly suited to make *symbolic* statements about power relations, since they often drew large audiences",⁴⁵ and he goes on to give examples from the processions of the Great Dionysia in Athens and the Hyacinthia in Sparta. In Athenaeus' description, this 'symbolic' aspect of religious processions is also present. Even though Simon Price's position regarding belief is disputable (see above), his approach to the rituals of the imperial period as not merely honors to the emperor but mainly as a sym-

41 On the significance of this procession, see R. A. Hazzard, *Imagination of a Monarchy: Studies in Ptolemaic Propaganda*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press 2000, 59-79. Athenaeus writes in the beginning of the third century CE. One could argue that the preserved text raises certain issues regarding its validity: who the author was, what kind of literary production the *Deipnosophistae* is, and how this affects the credibility of Athenaeus' description of the procession that took place almost five hundred years before his time. However, such an approach to ancient sources jeopardizes the study of almost every available source that historians have at their disposal. In addition, Athenaeus uses here another source, i.e., Kallixeinos of Rhodes, whose work is now lost. I think that it is futile to enter into such a debate. I subscribe to Michael Grant's position that historical objectivity is not possible since historians are restrained by three certain factors: the time and place they live in, their prejudices, and the inevitable decision to finally select what they will use and what they will disregard. See Michael Grant, *Greek and Roman Historians: Information and Misinformation*, London–New York: Routledge 1996, 88-89.

42 A. Chaniotis, "The Divinity of Hellenistic Rulers...", 438.

43 *Ibid.*

44 For example, see Stella Georgoudi, "Sacrificing to the Gods: Ancient Evidence and Modern Interpretations", in: Jan N. Bremmer–Andrew Erskine (eds.), *The Gods of Ancient Greece: Identities and Transformations*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2010, 92-105.

45 Jan N. Bremmer, *Greek Religion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1994, 40 (emphasis added).

bolic system that “defines the position of the emperor”⁴⁶ could also be applicable to the case of Ptolemy II – even though imperial cults had different agendas and should not be dealt with as cases identical to the royal and dynastic cults of the Hellenistic era.⁴⁷

Katelijn Vandorpe has wonderfully summarized the political aspect of such actions: “The Greek dynastic cult and its festivals were a perfect vehicle to display wealth and power. The Ptolemaieia ... became a weapon in the arena of world politics since most Greek states were invited.”⁴⁸ But accepting this position, which, from a political point of view, makes absolute sense, does not mean that it also answers our question: Did the people only think that these practices were merely political vehicles or did they actually believe in the alleged superhuman nature of the kings? Political rituals tend to concentrate on display. This is not a feature that is encountered solely in Hellenistic Egypt. Athenaeus’ description portrays a practice that constitutes the common locus of political processes that use rituals in order to construct power relations. The abundance of wealth gives to the spectators the impression that the person that controls and manages all this wealth cannot be a mere human – for the reason that the power that is portrayed “is usually perceived as coming from sources beyond the immediate control of the human community”.⁴⁹ Deification, as a result of immense wealth and power, allows the ruler to “enjoy an added strength and authority” but also plays “an important role in binding a kingdom together”.⁵⁰ In their celebrated book *Connected: The Surprising Power of Our Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives*, Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler argue that God can actually be part of a community’s social network. What is needed is a way for everybody, i.e., all members of a given community, to be connected to a ‘node’ that cannot be removed.⁵¹ However, such a person does not exist and even if s/he did, the connection could not be permanent due to her/his mortality. But what if that person was not mortal? Or, to put it differently, what if that person,

46 S. Price, *Rituals and Power...*, 8.

47 For example, see Mary Beard–John North–Simon Price, *Religions of Rome I: A History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996. The imperial cults were not restricted to a specific region even though they had different expressions in different places. Nevertheless, the royal cults of Hellenistic Egypt were a domestic affair, without any ecumenical aspect, as was – or was supposed to be – the case with imperial cults.

48 K. Vandorpe, “The Ptolemaic Period...”, 174.

49 Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, New York–Oxford: Oxford University Press 1997, 129.

50 D. Thompson, “The Ptolemies and Egypt...”, 115.

51 See Nicholas A. Christakis–James H. Fowler, *Connected: The Surprising Power of Our Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives*, New York–Boston–London: Little, Brown and Company 2009, 243.

through different processes, managed to cross from the human realm to that of the gods? Obviously, this could make that person the permanent ‘node’ of a community’s social network and, thus, allow for the preservation of the necessary coherence within that community. In a world full of conspiracies, collusions, and threats from abroad as well as from ‘above’, such as the world of the Hellenistic period, keeping a kingdom together was the primary goal. Still, did the people believe that their ruler was divine? François Chamoux has argued that “even if there was no supporting belief previous to the proven existence of [a] ritual, *it is certain that subsequently belief grew in support of it*”.⁵² The certainty expressed here is, of course, debatable. In order to challenge Chamoux’s position we only need to turn to the testimonies that come from individuals of that period who condemned such practices, the people that Versnel calls “critics belonging to the intelligentsia”.⁵³ But what was the case with other social groups?

Versnel argues that maybe it is time to turn our attention to the masses. These people, who in Athenaeus’ description of the great procession in Alexandria were the “audience of a lavishly-staged spectacle”,⁵⁴ certainly did not all belong to the intelligentsia. They attended the event, followed it, and admired the wealth (and the power it implied) that was paraded in front of them. For Versnel this very fact lies at the heart of our inquiry and if one seeks to provide an answer to the core question, then s/he should concentrate on this very important detail. Drawing from the work of the Dutch poet and novelist Frans Kellemdonk, who saw belief as sincere pretence, Versnel goes on to argue that what took place in these rituals was a *sincere hypocrisy*. Basing his approach on the dual meaning of the Greek word *hypokritēs*, actor and pretender or hypocrite, he argues that it is the former meaning that interests us in the case of the royal cults. In addition to the great show that was put together by the organizers and the active participation of various people in the processions and festivals, the spectators were at the same time actors:

While performing or attending ritual – and it should be noted that in ritual, however ‘spectacular’ it may be, the participants are actors at least as much as they are spectators – one has two options: either to fully (and sincerely) pretend or to break the rules of the game.⁵⁵

52 F. Chamoux, *Hellenistic Civilization...*, 225 (emphasis added).

53 H. Versnel, *Coping with the Gods...*, 476.

54 A. Chaniotis, “The Divinity of Hellenistic Rulers...”, 438.

55 H. Versnel, *Coping with the Gods...*, 470-471.

What Versnel is proposing implies that there is a possibility that the people who followed and watched the great procession organized by Ptolemy II *could* have believed that what they were witnessing was true, without further reflecting on what the agenda was behind this great spectacle.⁵⁶

Versnel's call to start thinking about the masses reminds us, *mutatis mutandis*, of the similar approach employed by Peter Brown regarding the study of Late Antiquity: "Nor is it possible to make a distinction between the 'unthinking' masses and the sophisticated agonizing of a small leisured minority and to concentrate our attention exclusively on the latter. In a world haunted by under-employment, far more people than we might imagine had time to think and to argue; and religion provided them with a universally available and sophisticated language with which to do so."⁵⁷ Often historians of religion tend to concentrate only on those very few who managed to preserve their opinions and positions through written testimonies. Even though I am not arguing that historians should dismiss or not take into consideration written sources and evidence (after all, written sources are the very object of their study), they frequently tend only to concentrate on such sources and make generalizations that cannot be verified or taken for granted. It cannot be simultaneously assumed that what the members of the 'intelligentsia' wrote, believed, and advocated represented the opinions (and thoughts) of the ordinary people as well.

Even if Versnel's hypothesis seems rather plausible, we should, however, examine how the people of Egypt adopted such a stance and whether what they experienced was 'belief', or 'belief in the belief' in the divine nature of the ruler.

Believing in belief

Returning to Simon Price's work, we find two divergent interpretative approaches to the connection between imperial cults and the notion of belief. Price argues that neither the literalists nor those who are in favor of a reinterpetative approach seem to offer a convincing case. The literalists maintain that the proclamation of the emperor (or Ptolemy II in our case) as a god (*theos*) raises no difficulty, because this is exactly what the people meant: the emperor was believed to be a true god. The reinterpetators, on the other hand, hold the opinion that there is a metaphorical meaning in this kind of proclamation. Thus, the emperor was only worshipped *like* a

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 476-477.

⁵⁷ Peter Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity*, Cambridge, MA-London: Harvard University Press 1978, 9.

god but not as a true one. Price himself maintains a combined approach. There is a symbolic meaning underlying these proclamations that allows for a looser interpretation: people may mean what they say about their emperor (or monarch, ruler, king, et cetera) without at the same time those “statements being fully determinate”.⁵⁸ I find Price’s position appealing but I think that there is also another interpretative path, based on the assumption that believing in something – or, better, believing that it is good to believe in something – pays off.

In his provocative⁵⁹ book, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, Daniel Dennett eloquently argues that even if belief in God is often condemned – at times by believers as well – believing in belief in God seems to dominate the (contemporary) world religious scene.⁶⁰ But what is the difference between these two views? A person who believes in God is confident about the existence of God. On the other hand, a person who believes in the belief in God is someone who thinks that such a view is something good and should be maintained; as Dennett puts it, “belief in the *belief that something matters* is understandably strong and widespread”.⁶¹ We can think of many reasons why believing in the belief that something matters is important. For example, believing that *believing that family matters* allows one to be an integral member of one’s own family and maintain its coherence and stability. But, on the other hand, this

58 See S. Price, *Rituals and Power...*, 9.

59 The book emerged within the atheistic ambience of the previous decade, with authors such as Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and Victor Stenger publishing widely on what is now called New Atheism. Dennett’s book was followed by many reactions, from fundamentalists to theologians, to religious studies scholars, to mere believers, but also – and this shows the overall polemic nature of the book – from scientists working in the cognitive science of religion. The book was the subject of a special issue of the journal *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* (20/1, 2008), with papers by prominent scholars working mainly in the philosophy of religion and the cognitive study of religion who were highly critical of Dennett’s book and – mainly – its ideological and polemical agenda. My usage here of one particular concept from Dennett’s book (even if central to his argument and, thus, tightly related to his agenda), i.e., the notion of belief in belief, does not imply that I subscribe to his positions per se nor do I see myself as an exponent of his theory. The most comprehensive criticism is provided by Armin W. Geertz, “New Atheistic Approaches in the Cognitive Study of Religion: On Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell* (2006) and Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (2006)”, in: Michael Stausberg (ed.), *Contemporary Theories of Religion: A Critical Companion*, London–New York: Routledge 2009, 242–263.

60 Here it should be mentioned that Dennett’s idea is hardly innovative. The notion that it is good to believe in God because it is in one’s interest to do so, has its roots in seventeenth century philosophers, such as in the work of Blaise Pascal. Of course, such a view comes from theism, but it is essentially based on the same principle as Dennett’s notion of belief in belief. For a discussion, see Kevin Schilbrack, *Philosophy and the Study of Religion: A Manifesto*, Malden, MA–Oxford: Blackwell 2014, 5–6.

61 D. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell...*, 202 (emphasis in the original); cf. also *ibid.*, 221.

idea that one cherishes does not come solely from the person herself. The belief that family matters is something ‘imposed’ on a person by her family since infancy – in addition to the influence coming from friends and their families, school teachers, et cetera. The way the social environment generates, affects, moderates, or eliminates beliefs, norms, and traditions is crucial for one’s belief in a belief. Mark Bevir argues:

First, we should explain why individuals adopt the beliefs they do, and so act as they do, by reference to the decisions they make against the background of particular social structures. Second, we should explain the existence of social structures, and so their effect, by reference to the way the beliefs and actions of individuals coalesce to create norms, patterns of behavior, institutions, and the like.⁶²

For Bevir, individuals adopt their beliefs and act according to what is predominantly present in their particular social contexts. It is “a process of socialization”⁶³ through which our own convictions and beliefs are shaped. Hence, the social context more or less determines our own beliefs – as well as our own belief that believing in something matters.

Another example in this regard comes from Christakis and Fowler. They mention an experiment conducted by John Cacioppo that is worth citing it in full:

Cacioppo and his colleagues administered personality tests to ninety-nine people (fifty of whom believed in God and forty-nine of whom did not) and then randomly assigned them to receive one of two possible interpretations of their performance on the test, regardless of how they actually performed. One interpretation was: “You’re the type who has rewarding relationships throughout life” (that is, you will be connected); and the other was: “You’re the type who will end up alone later in life” (that is, you will be disconnected). The subjects then rated the extent to which they believed in ghosts, spirits, God, and so on. Not surprisingly, subjects who reported believing in God before the start of the study reported a strong belief in these supernatural agents. However, regardless of their belief in God, those who were told that they would end up disconnected reported an increased belief in supernatural agents.⁶⁴

The experiment has important implications on how we deal with people who claim to believe in God, gods, or supernatural agents in general. Christakis and Fowler concluded that “making people feel disconnected did not, of course, turn atheists into deeply religious people, *but it did nudge people in the direction of believing in God*”.⁶⁵ Yet, on the basis of this experiment, couldn’t one also argue that the threat of future disconnection from the social environment could equally ‘nudge’ people in the di-

62 Mark Bevir, “The Individual and Society”, *Political Studies* 44, 1996, 102-114: 112.

63 *Ibid.*, 103.

64 N. Christakis–J. Fowler, *Connected...*, 245-246.

65 *Ibid.*, 246 (emphasis added).

rection of believing in the belief in God? And if so, to what ends? Certainly, there is a payoff in believing in belief in God, gods, supernatural agents or... kings. In the latter case, it is the protection and safety that these figures – either superhuman in their description or just divine-like – offer to the people who adhere to their cults. But, of course, this presupposes that things are done *in good faith*; and that presumes the existence of trust.⁶⁶ It is trust that regulates the reciprocal relationship between the believer and the recipient of any acts or statements of belief. And this is the final payoff of believing in something as well as *believing that belief in something* matters. However, there is always the risk that the recipient will never fulfill her/his part towards the believer(s).

Versnel argues in favor of a religious belief of the people in their rulers during the Graeco-Roman period. His vivid argumentation includes a quite logical point: “Why should Greek authors – comedy writers and others – try to deride or otherwise undermine the various contemporary deificatory strategies by exposing the overtly mortal aspects of the new gods, if they did not detect or assume an element of belief in those who endorsed them?”⁶⁷ Let us return to Theocritus and his seventeenth *Idyll*. Theocritus’ choice of words is outstanding. In the fashion of ‘carrot and stick’ his praise to Ptolemy swings between deification and mere honor to a powerful man, but merely a man nonetheless. Already from the beginning of the text we read: “From Zeus let us begin, Muses, and with Zeus let us end, when we make our songs, for he is pre-eminent among the gods. But *among mortals*, let Ptolemy be reckoned first; First and last and in between, for he is supreme *among men*” (lines 1-4, emphasis added); and after presenting Ptolemy’s marriage to his sister as another example of the king’s divine nature, he concludes: “Farewell, lord Ptolemy. You shall be my hymn’s theme no less than other *demigods*, and I believe my words will not be disregarded by men to come;⁶⁸ but as for excellence, *you must pray to Zeus for that*” (135-137, emphasis added). A god that prays to gods, who is supreme among men and first among mortals, is not a *real* god. And such a description comes from Theocritus, who himself was part of the manufacturing process of the divine nature of Ptolemy II, whose patronage he was enjoying.

66 See the excellent study by Sheela Pawar, *Trusting Others, Trusting God: Concepts of Belief, Faith and Rationality*, Surrey: Ashgate 2009.

67 H. Versnel, *Coping with the Gods...*, 467.

68 Theocritus’ anxiety was correct. Suetonius (*Divine Augustus* 18) described Octavius’ visit to Alexandria, after his successful war against Antonius and Cleopatra. Among the sites that he visited was Great Alexander’s tomb, where he paid his tribute. But when he was asked whether he would like to see the tombs of the Ptolemies he responded that he only wanted to see a king and not just some corpses.

This reading of Theocritus' *Idyll* not only shows us the cunning textual construction that he employed but also raises an important issue regarding the way we, later readers, approach these texts. The general tendency regarding Theocritus' praise to Ptolemy II is to see his text as an acknowledgment of the divine nature of Ptolemy II; and, of course, to acknowledge also means to accept – and, in this case, to believe or to urge readers to believe in Ptolemy's divinity. On the contrary, a careful reader even of that historical period could easily discern what Theocritus was saying: let us praise Ptolemy II and his sister/wife Arsinoe II in a way similar to Zeus and Hera, because *it is good to do so*.⁶⁹

Belief was certainly not a prerequisite to participate in the ruler and dynastic cults of Egypt; but belief in belief could have urged people to do so. This is what I think Theocritus' word-play indicates. In a short but rather interesting piece in the online blog of the *Bulletin for the Study of Religion*, Craig Martin recently argued that a ritual does not have to be “an ‘expression’ of an interior ‘belief’”.⁷⁰ Even though I do not completely agree with Martin's position,⁷¹ I would add that belief in belief is often expressed in a ritual – even more than belief itself. Even though the people – at times, including those next to the king – did not really believe in the ruler's divine nature, they nevertheless believed that believing in the divine nature of the king was something good. Thus, I believe that they were

69 In a very interesting paper regarding the way we read and use ancient texts, Gerhard van den Heever has argued that in a given text we find explicit and implicit data. The former are places, names, historical events, et cetera that are mentioned in the text; the latter constitute a more difficult case. These are “the values espoused by the author, the outlook on life propagated, how the inner workings of their world were conceived”, which mainly have to be “inferred from the way the text manipulates historical references to project its world”. In other words, in order to understand the way the ancients themselves looked at their world, we need to reconstruct that world, which can only be accomplished “from the rhetoric or the art or patterns of persuasion in a text, that is from the way it ‘distorts’ reality in order to create a new perspective on the world of the readers”. Gerhard van den Heever, “Finding Data in Unexpected Places (or: From Text Linguistics to Socio-Rhetoric): Towards a Socio-Rhetorical Reading of John's Gospel”, *Neotestamentica* 33/2, 1999, 343-364: 351.

70 Craig Martin, “Why Would They Do It If They Don't Believe?” *Bulletin for the Study of Religion* [online], <<http://www.equinoxpub.com/blog/2012/04/why-would-they-do-it-if-they-dont-believe/>>, [26 Apr 2014]. On the relationship of ritual and belief, also see Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, New York–Oxford: Oxford University Press 1992, 182-196; Malory Nye, *Religion: The Basics*, London–New York: Routledge 2008, 105-128.

71 Martin maintains that belief is a problematic point of departure for the study of religious people. I have already argued that ‘belief’ should not be excluded from our vocabulary, especially when we study ancient (dead) religious practices. And to be more precise, the term should not be disregarded so long as we do not have source material indicating that belief did not exist in religious phenomena such as the deification processes of the Graeco-Roman period.

professing their belief, rather than holding it. Dennett argues that to profess a belief does not simultaneously mean that you actually believe in what you are professing.⁷² As he puts it, “what is commonly referred to as ‘religious belief’ or ‘religious conviction’ might less misleadingly be called *religious professing* ... Professing is voluntary, but belief is not”.⁷³ It is its voluntary nature that suits both the professor and the receiver. Every statement of belief (or profession of belief) is governed by its specific situation and it is “sanctioned by a history and a community”.⁷⁴ Believing that *believing in the divine nature of the rulers* was something good was conditioned by the ruler’s offering of protection, safety, and security. People were professing their ‘belief’ because they maintained that believing that Ptolemy I Soter and Ptolemy II Philadelphus were gods was something good that would pay off.

Conclusion

Benson Saler offers a very interesting personal experience he had while conducting fieldwork among the Wayú, an Amerindian population in Colombia and Venezuela. Working on the myths of the Wayú culture, he had recorded a long myth as narrated by an indigenous member:

I had tape-recorded a long myth in the Wayú language, and the myth-teller then proceeded to translate his narrative into Spanish from the tape. Since I was learning the Wayú language, I paid close attention to the translation process. At one point I raised a question about a detail. My question, I thought, was about syntax and vocabulary. My informant, however, apparently understood it differently and supposed that I was trying to get the existential facts right, for he said to me in Spanish, ‘Do you believe that?’ I sensed one of those glorious moments in ethnographic fieldwork when a window unexpectedly opens on a topic of considerable importance, and I thought deeply about how I should reply. Apparently, I thought deeply for too long a time, for the myth-teller punctuated my silence by declaring, ‘We don’t believe that these things happened’.⁷⁵

72 Slavoj Žižek has also argued for that in another context. He discriminates between belief and faith, two rather problematic terms in the study of both ancient and modern religious phenomena. As he puts it: “One can believe in ghosts without having faith in them, i.e. without believing them (considering them tricky and evil, not feeling bound to them by any pact or commitment); and, in a more tricky but crucial opposite case, one can believe (have faith in) X without believing in X” (Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief*, London–New York: Routledge 2001, 109).

73 D. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell...*, 228.

74 Donald S. Lopez, “Belief”, in: Mark C. Taylor (ed.), *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, Chicago–London: University of Chicago Press 1998, 21-35: 33.

75 Benson Saler, “Finding Wayú Religion”, in: id., *Understanding Religion: Selected Essays*, Berlin–New York: Walter de Gruyter 2009, 116-131: 125-126.

The Wayú people do not actually believe that the godlike beings of their myths are themselves objects of worship. However, to talk about these figures, to accept the myths that accompany them, makes these myths serve “as discursive devices” that are connected not only to the Wayú religion but also to “many aspects of Wayú life, and particularly the cognized and experienced tensions and contrasts of life”.⁷⁶ What can we learn from this indigenous attitude? The Wayú narrate myths that accompany their religious agents even though they do not truly *believe* in those myths. But nevertheless they narrate, diffuse, and maintain them in their everyday life, with all due respect. Although there is no literal belief in these myths, the same cannot be said about belief in belief. It is good to continue circulating these myths for reasons that are self-evident; these mythical stories are embedded in the community’s everyday life, thus they keep the community together. In other words, there is a belief that believing in these stories is something that matters, even if truly believing in the myths is easily rejected by many Wayú as Saler points out.

In this paper I have argued that belief in belief, rather than belief per se, could be considered as the generated attitude in the royal and dynastic cults organized and established by Ptolemy II Philadelphus and his sister/wife Arsinoe II. Even though the very term ‘belief’ is quite problematic, especially when used in pre-Christian religious traditions, it should nevertheless not be excluded from our terminological quiver. Henk Versnel has brilliantly shown that belief in gods in Greek religion was as vibrant as in the monotheistic religions of the modern world. The emergence of royal and dynastic cults during the Hellenistic period, especially as formed and regulated in Ptolemaic Egypt, introduced a rather difficult problem: Did the people of that period actually believe in the divinity of their rulers? I have argued that the notion of ‘belief in belief’ seems to fit better into this religio/political institution. This approach brings together the two traditional ways of dealing with the phenomenon of deification during this period. By utilizing Daniel Dennett’s notion of ‘belief in belief’, it is possible to re-approach these phenomena by examining the underlying benefits for both *alleged* believers and *alleged* gods.

76 *Ibid.*, 126.

SUMMARY

Belief in Belief and Divine Kingship in Early Ptolemaic Egypt: The Case of Ptolemy II Philadelphus and Arsinoe II

One of the main questions accompanying the phenomenon of deified kings in the Graeco-Roman world is whether people actually believed in the divine nature of their potentates. Taking Ptolemy II Philadelphus and his sister/wife Arsinoe II as a case of study, I argue that even though divine kingship was a political development that sought to establish a dynasty and, hence, political stability within a Hellenistic kingdom, it nevertheless generated a *kind* of belief. Drawing on Daniel Dennett's notion of 'belief in belief', I suggest that in the case of Ptolemaic Egypt believing in the belief that Ptolemy II and his sister/wife were divine was a possible 'religious' reaction by the people of Egypt. Such an approach suggests that the phenomenon of divine kingship generated a kind of response that must not be over-seen or rejected solely on the basis of the political agendas that in principle motivated such practices, as most scholars have traditionally argued.

Keywords: belief in belief; divine kingship; Ptolemaic Egypt; Ptolemy II; Arsinoe II; deification.

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