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Every single religion in the world enjoys a history that rolls back for centuries and ages hence. These histories help to identify a people and distinguish them from all the others. It is not just the history that matters but it is the legacy behind the story that gives a people the pride for their history. As it is commonly agreed, it is difficult to tell where we are headed if we cannot tell where we come from. Everyone and everything starts somewhere and it is only necessary to identify this source, so that we can predict the future. As it is the nature of mankind to move from the known to unknown, the slightest idea of a fragment of history that lies untold immediately sparks a lot of desire and urge to explore the line further. This is not an affair that started with the contemporary developments. It spins back to the ages of early explorers. It is this drive that drove Prince Henry the navigator to send voyages all over the world in order to discover the undiscovered lands including Africa. Galileo Galilei and Christopher Columbus were driven by the same desire when they sought to prove that the world was round. They wanted to discover and learn more. Religion also has its own history and the current religions of the world have come up after years of evolution. It does not matter whether Christian, Islam, Buddhism or whichever religion there is. There is always a history behind, and unearthing it is both an exciting and educative affair. It is therefore not a wonder that theologians have greatly dwelt on this issue.

When it comes to the history of religions, Greece cannot be left behind. The ancient Greece probably has a richer religious history than any other nation. It is not a wonder that even the Christians' holy Bible was first written in Greek and Hebrew, with other translations coming later on. However, there

are still some portions that have not been sufficiently translated, and this has continuously been a concern of theologians. Among the many Greek religions was the Delphic Oracle, which served to bring order and sanity in Greece before the coming of Christianity, as discussed in this essay.

Definition and History

According to Hart (1), the Oracle of Apollo that is situated at Delphi was one of the most striking and phenomenal establishments. The god of Apollo was located beneath the Shining Rocks of mount Parnassus within the confines of the olden temple-sanctuary. The god communicated through Pythia, a human priestess who gave guidance and counsel to all those who cared to borrow the advice of the god. The advice was based on much wisdom and understanding, as commonly believed by the ancient people. The intrigues of this oracle are present to date and the Delphi is a major tourist destination as the people seek to have a glimpse of this old aged culture. However, the gods have since ceased talking or communicating to people but the place still holds that aura around it.

Dempsey (1) tries to give the real picture of the Delphic Oracle, as opposed to the misconstrued perception that many have about it. He observes that at the mention of the oracle, many people tend to think of the image of the golden-haired Apollo, commonly known as the lord of the silver bow who is bestowed with power, grace and integrity. Dempsey argues that this assumption is wrong and goes on to explain about the Oracle. He notes that the Oracle was not the only Greece religion; there were other older and dark religions before the coming of the Apolline form of worship at the snow

covered Parnassus. In the Oracle, Pythia was the priestess that was used by the oracle to communicate with the people, to tell of the major prophecies that were inspired by the Apollo. The oracle was set up in the 8th century BC and became the most famed oracle in the history of Greece, till the period of AD 393 when emperor Theodosius ordered the closure of pagan operations. The oracle drew its name from python, which was a myth in the Greek people of Delphi. The word is derived from the Greek pythein, which means a rotting. This was inspired by the rotting of the body of the giant python after it was killed by Apollo. As the story goes, the pythia prophesied while under the influence of the gases that emanated from the vapors coming from the chasm of the rock. She spoke in gibberish language which the priests later translated into Greek, and it was preserved in the Greek literature (Dempsey, 3-5).

Powers of the oracle

The Oracle was believed to have many powers and therefore many people consulted it. The consultations would range from individual queries to major issues such as enquiries on whether to go to war or not. Old and young consulted the oracle alike, and the prophecies received there always seemed to come true. For instance, the colonial powers are believed to have inquired from the oracle before setting off for Spain, Italy and Africa. Individuals would also freely consult the oracle on issues to do with their physical well being and also concerning their businesses. As indicated Hart (2), many of the Greek myths heavily draw from the oracle. Top on the list is Oedipus, who was used by Sigmund Freud to come up with the theory of development. It is believed that the oracle had forewarned Oedipus that he would kill his

father and marry his mother. He tried all he could to fight his fate but as history has it, he failed miserably and did just as the oracle had prophesied. Orestes also enquired on whether to take revenge on his mother who had killed his father, and the oracle was in full support of his mission. These incidences show that the oracle was actually influential and powerful. To assert this version, it is observed that many scholars do give credit to the oracle in their writing. Some of the people who have cited the oracle include Diodorus, Diogenes, Aeschylus, Aristotle, Herodotus, Euripides, Julian, Clement of Alexandria, Ovid, Lucan, Pausanias, Sophocles, Xenophon among others. These are major scholars whose works are cited and accredited to date. Therefore, if the oracle of Delphi finds a mention in their works, then it must actually be quite a force to reckon with.

Hart (1-3) echoes the same view by observing that there are great people who were nurtured by the oracle or served it, showing its role in shaping the society. Hart puts it that Pythagoras went to Delphi and stayed with the pythia, serving as the voice of the god. Pythagoras later made a contribution in mathematics, coming up with the Pythagoras theorem which is used to date. This made the Greek believe that the oracle actually had some mystic powers. Herodotus was also at the Delphi with the aim of writing what was said; more of secretarial duties while Plutarch acted as Apollo's priest for years. These personalities later made impacts on the society. Lykurgos and Solon, both of whom were great lawyers sought the oracles ideas on the issues of law. Thanks to the advice they got, their cities became the ideals of justice and law. This is a dictate of the wisdom that could be drawn from the oracle. Other influential people also sought the oracles help such as Oedipus

(as earlier mentioned), Alexander the Great and the King of Thebes. The king of Lydia also did send envoys to the oracle and so did many other from the Christian, Greek and the Roman empire. All these people believed that the oracle could help them in one way or another, and as they got assisted, they further asserted that the oracle was indeed powerful (Hart, 1).

The powers of the oracle are believed to have been discovered in somewhat a coincidence rather than a planned activity. As recorded in the Greek history (Hart, 3). A Greek historian, Diodoros, notes that a herdsman was following his goats to a rugged glen when he suddenly received some sort of mystical inspiration that allowed him to see the future. He therefore started testifying. His goats also demonstrated a similar effect since they started bleating in an unusual manner and gamboling about. Other people claim that they experience some sort of uplifting while in the oracle while Plutarch himself claimed that during his service at the sanctuary, he always felt some form of fragrance, as if the gods were sending forth some essences of sweet and expensive perfumes. All these claims serve to acclaim the awesomeness of the oracle, as witnessed by those who served in it or came across it in one way or another.

Procedures of the oracle

Hart (5) notes that the oracle observed its discipline on the people who served within. For instance, the Pythias knew quite well about the sanctity of their duties and they prepared well enough for it. As a common and normal ritual, they purified themselves by drinking the crystal waters of the Castalian spring and also donned simple clothing, such as the ones

illustrated on the paintings of the Greek pottery. The procedure to be followed at the oracle was also clear and well articulated. The prophetess would burn barley meal and bat leaves at the altar and then sit on the tall tripod commonly referred to as the high seat- showing the much respect accorded to the oracle and his messengers. She would then settle and be attended to by a priest, waiting for the fumes to infiltrate her and give her the power to do her duties.

Once the prophetess was ready, the priest would escort the consultants one by one, and these would either ask the questions orally or put them down on paper. The prophetess would then respond directly and very precisely. Those who recorded these sessions have a claim that the enquirer and the god conversed directly, with one asking direct questions and the other answering directly (Dempsey, 10). However, the case was different when the consultant had not come personally but sent a representative. Under such circumstances, the Pythia would not respond but rather would put down the response on paper and then the priest would tie it up. He then handed it to the sent person would dispatch the note to the person for which it was intended. Hart (5) notes that after these sessions, the Pythia left feeling happy, fulfilled and satisfied.

Dempsey (4) notes that there was a general procedure that was followed in order to authenticate the message from the god. He observes that the messages delivered were of great importance, though some were lofty and personal. Such responses were cherished in private, though some again were subjected to scrutiny after the oracle had ceased functioning. The key thing

is that the original recipients of the message were supposed to put the delivered message to inner scrutiny and judgment, so as not to act irrationally.

The general procedures followed during the consultation were meant to eliminate any doubt that the enquirers may have had about the oracle. They were meant to make the individual at ease and acknowledge that the message to be delivered was from the god, and therefore inspire trust and confidence from the individual. The procedure involved the Pythia pronouncing that Apollo himself was speaking, and therefore the message was to be taken with the seriousness it commanded. She would then assume the place of the god - as she was his voice - and would say something to the effect of concern for the individual. For instance, she would say something like, " Happy is the man who enters my house." After this, she would then go on to answer the questions that the individual had. She always concluded with a message that challenged the inquirer's intuition and sense of judgment. As Herakleitos observed, there was no incidence when the god Delphi either reveal or hide anything from the recipients. Rather, the god just gave counsel, instructions and guidance. From then on, the individual would use his wits to put the advice into practice.

The oracle also parallels the modern day religious virtues and beliefs. For instance, at one time, a rich magistrate once sent the oracle a good offering. He then went on to inquire on who was the most religious man alive (Hart, 10). He, of course, was driven by his ego. Apollo, observing this, answered that the most pious individual was a peasant who had just given a handful of

barley. This was a way of taming the magistrate's ego. It is quite striking that even in the Bible that the Christians use today, such an incident is recorded. It is recorded that once when Jesus was preaching and the people were offering, he claimed that the one who gave the most was a widow who had just given some three pennies. This religious marker brings a two-fold interpretation: first, it is clear that both the oracle and Christianity do appreciate humble and peaceful people. Equally, there is an indication that one is not judged by what he does, but by the motive behind his actions.

End of the oracle

Dempsey (17-27) documents the fall of the oracle. He notes that the oracle did actually benefit from the Kings of Macedonia and thereafter protected by the Aetolians. The oracle had been in operation for a short while when the Roman Empire started coming up. The Romans, being friendly, protected the Delphi Oracle from the barbarian attack in 109BC and 105 BC. In the aftermath of the Mithridatic and Sulla wars that followed shortly after, the temple was looted and the attackers made away with the spoils. Another challenge in the sustainability of the temple was that there were positions that needed to be filled. However, the population was so thin that there was nobody to stand in that gap. With time, the credibility of the oracle came to doubt due to some incorrect predictions, and its woes were not over yet. In AD 66, Nero came to Greece and made away with over 500 Delphi statutes to Rome. When Constantine 1 rose to power and ushered in the Chistendom, there was nothing more that could save the oracle. Not even the coming to power of Julian. The oracle still tried to hold on until AD 395 when emperor Theodosius rose to the throne and closed down pagan temples (Dempsey,

164-176). That was the last straw on the camel's back. The oracle site was abandoned for well over 100 years when the Christians came in and settled there.

Conclusion

The Delphi oracle, located in the Panassius Mounts, was a major unifying factor in Greek, as discussed above. Not only did it have a powerful influence on the people of that area, it also reached far and different personalities came to the temple to inquire on various issues. The oracle, due to its exploits, carves a niche in the works of many acclaimed scholars, showing that it actually had an impact on the society then. It is also notable that some of the all time great scholars did one way or another get some inspiration from the oracle. Therefore, it can be concluded that the Delphi Oracle was a major unifying factor, just as religion is today. Besides taking care of the people's welfare, the oracle was also keen on instilling virtues in the community. This has been illustrated in the essay. Though not so much is known about the oracle, the available literature shows that its presence ensured peaceful co-existence, and played the role that is fulfilled the functions that in the modern day are handled by the different religious groups.

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