

ATHENIAN RELIGION AND THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR

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P iety, as Euthyphro defines it in Plato’s dialogue of that name (14b–15a), consists in ‘knowing how to say and do things pleasing to the gods when praying and sacrificing.’ What the gods specifically desire from mortals via sacrifice is ‘honour, prerogatives, and returns of favour.’ What they give in return comprises the whole category of what makes for a good life: ‘We have nothing good,’ says Socrates, ‘which the gods do not give’.

Although the dramatic date of this passage is 399 B.C., and thus after the conclusion of the Peloponnesian War, it nicely articulates the conceptual framework within which the Athenians located their religious activities. The relationship between gods and humans was conceived in terms of reciprocity (an ongoing exchange of voluntary, if socially prescribed, favours)¹ before, during, and after the great war between Athens and Sparta. What did change during the course of the war was the intensity of the pressures put on that relationship. There was no ‘crisis’ of belief or practice in late fifth-century Athenian religion, but rather a series of challenges that, in the end, were overcome even as the empire itself was lost. The purpose of this essay is to explore the nature of those challenges and the responses to them. The topic is a large one, and not every aspect can be discussed in so short a compass. I will begin with questions of definition and method, and then look at some specific problems and events.

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APPROACHING ATHENIAN RELIGION

Athenian ‘religion’ is notoriously difficult to isolate or define, because it did not exist as a discrete cultural practice, but rather as a range of practices that were embedded in all aspects of life, both public and private. It is possible to get around this difficulty by referring to Athenian ‘religious beliefs and practices’ in a general sort of way.² But what types of beliefs and what kinds of practices? And what was their function? Did they serve as explanations for the activities of invisible supernatural beings, or were they rather mere symbols for social relationships and for claims to social status?

The latter, ‘symbolist’, approach is the one employed by most classicists, as well as by the majority of cultural anthropologists. Indeed, the conclusion of Durkheim’s *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, that ‘religion is something eminently social’, has, in the words of Robert Parker, become something of a cliché among students of Greek religion. This is not the only way, however, to view the phenomenon that we call ‘Greek religion’. An ‘intellectualist’ position sees religion as an attempt by human beings to make sense of their experiences and of the world in which they live.³ These two approaches to the study of religion are complementary, rather than mutually exclusive, and in what follows I attempt to analyze Athenian religion during the war years both as a belief system and as a symbolic system.⁴ In other words, it is possible to accept Durkheim’s proposition that religion is ‘eminently social’, in the sense that it supports social structures and enhances community solidarity, while at the same time taking religious belief-statements at their face value as attempts at ordering, explaining, predicting, and controlling the world.

To talk about ‘religious belief’ at all is problematic, and some scholars have denied the concept of ‘religious belief’ altogether to the Greeks and Romans by claiming that their religion was exclusively concerned with ritual.⁵ Yet it is an absurdity to think that ritual acts can be detached from the sets of beliefs that made them meaningful for the participants. It is clear that the majority of Athenians believed that the gods existed, that they took an interest in human affairs, that their actions and motives were often inscrutable, that their good will could be secured through sacrifice, that it was dangerous to provoke their displeasure, that impious acts could affect the entire community, and that the gods communicated to humans through signs that were often difficult to interpret. So one can certainly talk about generally held beliefs, even if such beliefs did not form a creed and were not derived from sacred texts.⁶ There were, to be sure, some members of the elite who, under the influence of the sophists, had come to question the very existence of the traditional gods

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of the city.⁷ Nonetheless, the continuing performance of Athens' traditional festivals and religious rituals indicates that the majority of Athenians still had faith in their traditional beliefs about the nature of the gods and their interactions with men.

How do these insights relate to the period of the Peloponnesian War, or to Greek history generally? Although historians of ancient Greece readily admit that religious authority and political authority were inseparable in the Greek world, the consequence is that they then see religious motives as mere pretexts for pragmatic political actions. But that is far too simple. The gods are powerful tools in the hands of potential manipulators, but there are always strict limits to manipulation when those involved believe in and live by the ideas that they are manipulating.⁸ Or to put it differently, if the Greeks did not believe that their gods directly interfered in human affairs, there would have been no point in anyone (whether individual or community) attempting to manipulate religious ideas. The religious actions and decisions of the Athenians were not aimed simply at other men (whether fellow citizens, allies, or enemies), but at the gods as well. To be sure, both the Spartans and the Athenians employed religion as a political weapon, but they also believed (despite Thucydides' general silence on such matters) that the gods themselves were taking an active role in the war and that the support of the gods could be either won or lost by certain types of human actions.

Unfortunately, Thucydides, our most important source for the Peloponnesian War, had a tendency to minimize the importance of religious activity as a factor in human affairs.⁹ Even if Thucydides did make some attempt to explore the alleged disintegration and debasement of traditional religion as a casualty of the war,¹⁰ that hardly compensates for his lack of sufficient attention to the religious dimensions of the war. To give but one important example, Thucydides was generally dismissive of divination as a source of knowledge (or at least of people's ability to interpret oracles and portents correctly), and his few references to seers and oracle-mongers put them in a highly unfavourable light.¹¹ His skepticism comes out most clearly in his statement that the only oracle to have proved true about the Peloponnesian War was that it would last for 'thrice nine years' (5.26.3). As a consequence, he neglects even to mention the Athenian consultation of the major oracular shrines at Dodona, Siwah, and Delphi before the Sicilian expedition. The only redress lies in a combination of extrapolating 'popular beliefs' from what Thucydides does tell us and supplementing his account from later sources. The latter procedure, however, is complicated by the fact that the tradition about the Peloponnesian War, like that about the Persian Wars, was subject to an ongoing process of elaboration and embellishment.

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APOLLO: SENDER AND DIVERTER OF PLAGUES

In 432 B.C. the Spartan assembly voted that the Thirty Year's Peace had been broken and that the Athenians were acting unjustly (Thuc. 1.87–88). Despite assertions to the contrary, this was not a declaration of war per se, but merely a statement of record.¹² They then summoned their allies to Sparta for a league congress where this resolution would again be put to the vote (Thuc. 1.119, 125). During the interlude between that meeting of the Spartan assembly and the convening of their allies, the Spartans consulted the oracle of Apollo at Delphi (Thuc. 1.118.): 'Sending to Delphi they asked the god if it would be better for them to go to war. It is said that he responded to them that if they fought with all their might victory would be theirs, and he said that he himself would assist them both if he were invoked and if he were unbidden.'

The form of the question that the Spartans put to the god, as well as the fact that they consulted the god at all in such circumstances, is not surprising. Both the question ('Is it good to do x?') and the reply ('you will succeed if you try as hard as you can') are typical features of Delphic prophecy. Apollo was giving good advice and he could not be wrong (if the Spartans lost, it would be their own fault for not trying quite hard enough). What is surprising, remarkably so, is the additional statement that Apollo offered to assist the Spartans in the war. Nonetheless, modern scholars have been misled by this oracle into thinking that Delphi had taken the side of Sparta and that the Athenians were wary of consulting Delphi during the Archidamian War. The Athenians, however, saw the matter differently, and so did the Spartans themselves.

In the summer of 430, the plague first broke out in Athens. Thucydides says (2.54.4–5) that those who knew about the oracle given to the Lacedaemonians conjectured that the present events were in accord with it, 'for the plague broke out as soon as the Peloponnesians had invaded and it did not affect the Peloponnese to any degree worth mentioning.' It would be an error to infer from this passage that only a very few in Athens were in the know, because the Spartans would have been motivated to spread the word about their oracle as widely as possible. We can reasonably infer that the Athenians collectively must have believed that Apollo had caused this particular plague just as he had caused the plague that struck the Achaean camp at the beginning of the *Iliad*.¹³ And thus when Pericles addressed the people on the state of affairs in the spring of 430 (Thuc. 2.64.2) he classified the plague as being among things 'sent by the gods' (*ta daimonia*). Thucydides does not spell out the Homeric analogy, but he did not need to. Thucydides himself gives more space and more emphasis to the debate over whether an ancient oracle (which he calls an *epos*) had predicted that a pestilence (*loimos*) or a famine (*limos*)

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would come with a Dorian war. But what surely weighed most heavily on people's minds was the connection between the plague and Delphic Apollo's explicit promise of support to Sparta.

Thucydides leaves it unsaid why Apollo should have been so eager to aid Sparta. The explanation that comes most readily to the mind of a modern reader (that the staff at Delphi, like the majority of Greeks, was confident of a Spartan victory)¹⁴ is not the one that would have had resonance with Athenian popular opinion. Euthyphro, in the passage quoted at the beginning of this essay, had not only defined piety, but also its converse: 'The opposite of what is pleasing to the gods is impious, the very thing that overturns and destroys everything.' According to popular religious views, the presence of even a single man who was polluted or cursed (such as Oedipus in Sophocles' roughly contemporary *Oedipus Tyrannus*) could bring down the wrath of the gods on the entire city. And the one man who had done the most to encourage the Athenians to stand up to Sparta was indeed subject to a hereditary pollution. Thus the Spartans had urged the Athenians, as a condition of avoiding war, 'to drive out the curse of the goddess', 'knowing that Pericles the son of Xanthippus was implicated in it on his mother's side' (Thuc. 1.126–7). His mother's ancestor Megacles, of the family of the Alcmaeonidae, had been involved in impiously executing the Cylonian conspirators in the 630s B.C. It would have been reasonable enough for the Athenians, suffering from a plague of unprecedented severity, to see Pericles as the direct object of Apollo's wrath.¹⁵ Yet Pericles' own death in autumn 429 did not bring an end to the suffering as Oedipus' banishment had ended the mythical plague in Thebes, and so another remedy was required. Thucydides' tendentious claim (2.47.4) that the Athenians had given up any hope of divine assistance may have been true for a short time, but no more (as I argue at the end of this essay).

If Apollo was actively aiding and abetting the Spartans, and with deadly effect, what could be done to counter this situation? In terms of Greek religious belief, several options lay open to the Athenians. Although Thucydides does not give its purpose (2.56), it has plausibly been suggested that the aim of the Athenian naval expedition that came close to capturing Epidaurus in the summer of 430 was to seize control of the sanctuary of the healing god Asclepius.¹⁶ This hypothesis is suggested by the fact that the Athenians imported Asclepius' cult from Epidaurus to Athens in 420 (*IG* II² 496), a move which the Peace of Nicias in 421 had made possible. As a rule, the selection of religious cults and concepts takes place according to the wants and desires standard to the social group that adopts them.¹⁷ The Athenians in the 420s obviously had good reason for wanting and desiring to import the cult of a healing god.¹⁸

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Delphic Apollo may have stated at the outset of the war that he would assist the Spartans, but that did not preclude turning to Apollo himself as well as to other gods for support. As in the *Iliad*, the god who brought the plague also had the power to stay it. Nor was the extent or duration of Apollo's support for Sparta at all clear. By 414 the Spartans were blaming themselves, if we can believe Thucydides (7.18), for their misfortunes in the Archidamian War because they had refused arbitration in 432, the implication being that they had provoked the wrath of the gods against themselves as oath-breakers.¹⁹

The most ostentatious means of winning Apollo's support available to the Athenians was to appease Delian Apollo. Indeed, the need to turn to Delian Apollo is the most basic explanation for the decision in the winter of 426/5 to purify the sacred island of Delos (Apollo's birthplace) by removing all existing graves and forbidding death and childbirth to take place there in the future.²⁰ The Athenians also reestablished the quinquennial Delian games on a grand scale. Whereas the festival in recent years had only included choruses and sacrifices, the Athenians restored musical and gymnastic contests and introduced horse racing as a new feature. There had, of course, been a partial purification by Pisistratus, who had removed all bodies buried within sight of the temple and reinterred them elsewhere on the island.²¹

Thucydides does not give a motive for the purification, other than to say that it was done 'in accordance with a certain oracle'. Modern scholars have been quick to adduce political motives, interpreting Athenian actions as a 'magnificent imperial gesture' and as an attempt to establish an Athenian-controlled panhellenic festival to rival those on the mainland.²² Some moderns have even gone so far as to map their own moral sensibilities onto Thucydides' narrative, seeing in Athens' treatment of Delos the brutality, violence, and cruelty of Athenian political opportunism and the suffering of the innocent Delians.²³ Doubtless the Delians themselves could not have been pleased and other Greeks may or may not have sympathized with their plight,²⁴ but the primary Athenian motive for the purification was to win the good will of Apollo.

Indeed, we are explicitly told by Diodorus, drawing perhaps on the fourth-century historian Ephorus of Cyme, that the Athenian motive was religious.²⁵ As Diodorus says (12.58.6): 'The Athenians, however, on account of the excessiveness of the disease, ascribed the cause of their misfortune to the deity. Consequently, in accordance with a certain oracle, they purified the island of Delos, which was sacred to Apollo and which seemed to have been defiled by the burial there of the dead.' Diodorus' explanation makes good sense because there had been a second major outbreak of the plague in the winter of 427/6, which Thucydides (3.87) says lasted not less than a

year. The connection between the purification and the plague comes close to being proved by a fifth-century altar still in situ on Delos, a dedication by the Athenians to ‘Apollo Paion (the healer) and Athena’.²⁶

Yet to distinguish between political propaganda and religious piety, privileging one over the other, is to violate the very principle of ‘embeddedness’ on which modern scholars of Greek religion rightly insist. One can simultaneously hope to win the favour of the gods while self-consciously attempting to use one’s own piety to impress and manipulate others. Plutarch, himself a priest at Delphi, certainly could think in terms of a belief-based piety that could be manipulated to support a claim to high social status while simultaneously reinforcing the subordinate status of others.

In describing Nicias’ splendid and extravagant decking out of the Athenian chorus at the recently reorganized festival on Delos (*Nicias* 3), Plutarch ends his account by emphasizing Nicias’ private dedication to Apollo of a bronze palm tree²⁷ and of an estate, the revenues from which were to fund banquets for the Delians at which they would ‘ask the gods for many good things for Nicias.’ Here for once we can be certain that some Hellenistic biographer did not make this up or attribute to Nicias personally what the Athenian delegation had done collectively; for Plutarch cites a stele which recorded these arrangements in Nicias’ name. For Plutarch (*Nicias* 4), this whole incident was evidence of both Nicias’ ‘piety’ and his ‘personal ambition’. His religious actions on Delos were both a symbol of his high social status and an indication of his belief in the efficacy of ritual action as a means of securing the favour of the gods. Here, we might say, symbolist and intellectualist conceptions of the nature of religion coincide. Moreover, Nicias’ personal actions can be seen as paradigmatic for those of his countrymen. As in his case, it would be difficult to separate self-aggrandizement from piety, the desire to impress and control their allies from the need to persuade and influence their gods.

There is yet another aspect to the question of why the Athenians purified Delos. On what authority did they do so? The consensus of modern scholarship is that the ‘certain oracle’ that both Diodorus and Thucydides refer to in the very same words could not have issued from Delphi. Is this a case of letting unfounded preconceptions bias how one evaluates the evidence? The Athenians were not officially barred from consulting Delphi at any point during the war,²⁸ and consultations of the oracle took place in c. 421 and 415 (see below). Dedications also continued. In 429, they dedicated the figureheads of ships and bronze shields as first fruit offerings from Phormio’s naval victory in the Corinthian gulf.²⁹ The only real objection to a Delphic origin for this ‘certain oracle’ is the seemingly dismissive way in which Thucydides (3.104.1) refers to it (κατὰ χρησμόν δὴ τινα), and his wording has been

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taken as evidence that he had suspicions about its genuineness.³⁰ Yet in terms of Thucydides' own linguistic usage that is demonstrably false: there is nothing dismissive in his tone.³¹

The positive evidence for Delphic authorship is circumstantial, but highly suggestive. Pausanias (1.3.4) says that in front of the temple of Apollo Patroos at Athens there stood a statue of Apollo Alexikakos (Averter of Evil) by the sculptor Calamis. He then gives an explanation: 'They say that the god received this name because in accordance with an oracle from Delphi he stayed the pestilence which afflicted the Athenians at the time of the war with the Peloponnesians.' The testimony of Pausanias on this point has not received much credence in modern scholarship,³² but it should be emphasized that stories that explain their origin are often attached to monuments and dedications.³³ And although one should always be wary of supplementing or correcting a contemporary source (such as Thucydides) by invoking later sources, the combined evidence of Pausanias and Diodorus carries considerable weight in this particular case. One more piece of circumstantial evidence clinches the argument for a Delphic oracle.

In 422, the Athenians took a step further and decided to expel the living Delians as well, 'believing that they had not been pure at the time of their consecration because of some ancient offense' (Thuc. 5.1). Thucydides neglects to tell us what this offence was, but the answer is probably to be found in a quotation from a lost speech of the Athenian orator Hyperides. In his 'Delian Speech' of 343 B.C. Hyperides recounted the murder of some wealthy Aeolian visitors by the Delians, his point surely being that they had forfeited their right to manage the sacred place as a result of this impious crime.³⁴ It is a good guess that this was the same offense and the same argument that the Athenians had employed in the 420s. However that may be, here, for once, Thucydides has not neglected the influence of religion on human action. Ironically, however, it is Diodorus (12.73.1) who adds a political explanation, that the Athenians accused the Delians of secret treaty negotiations with the Spartans. Moderns, this time accepting Diodorus over Thucydides, have invoked Athens' desire to have unfettered control over Delos.³⁵ Yet here again religious and political motives are not inconsistent, nor is one the excuse for the other, but they function in tandem and mutually reinforce each other. If the Delians had indeed contacted the Spartans, that in itself might have constituted the sign that they were still tainted by the pollution of their impious crime.

In any case, Apollo at Delphi could not tolerate a total expulsion and an oracle was issued to reinstate them. This the Athenians duly did in the summer of 421. Thucydides' admission that the Athenians readily complied is striking proof of their willingness to act for what we would consider purely

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religious motives (5.32.1): ‘They brought back the Delians to Delos, taking to heart their misfortunes in the battles and because the god in Delphi had proclaimed it through an oracle.’ This can only mean that the Athenians attributed their defeats at Delium in 424 (where they had sacrilegiously occupied Apollo’s temple³⁶) and at Amphipolis in 422 to the god’s wrath. It looks as if Delphi played a role in all of the Athenians’ actions concerning Apollo’s sacred island, from ordering the purification as a means of staying the plague to restraining excessive Athenian action in expelling the Delians. As the plague did not return and peace was established with Sparta in 421 under the terms of the Peace of Nicias, it must have seemed as if the purification of Delos and the wooing of Delian Apollo had been a success.

One question, however, remains. Why did the Pythia order the reinstatement of the Delians? Was this a blatant intervention into the world of ‘politics’? The explanation (and it is a moral, not a political one) may be found in the second to last section of Thucydides’ history, 8.108. We are there told, in a brief flashback, that the Persian Arsaces had lured the best of the Delians out of Atramyttium, where they had settled after their expulsion from Delos, and then treacherously slaughtered them. It was out of pity for their sufferings, I suggest, that the Pythia sought their restoration.

It is a gross misunderstanding of the function of Delphi in Greek society to think that the Greeks perceived the oracle as an instrument of human partisanship.³⁷ Athenian eagerness to have access to the oracle, the most authoritative in the world, is underscored by the fact that freedom of access is the first clause in the text both of the one-year truce of 423 (Thuc. 4.118.1–2) and of the Peace of Nicias in 421 (Thuc. 5.18).³⁸ Either shortly before the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War or in the later 420s (the dating is uncertain), the Athenians were backed by a Delphic oracle for an extraordinary panhellenic invitation to the Greek world. The First Fruits Decree requires Athenian citizens and allied cities, as well as inviting all other Greek cities, to offer first fruits of wheat and barley to the goddesses at Eleusis ‘in accordance with ancestral custom and the oracle from Delphi.’³⁹ Delphi was here supporting a major Athenian initiative in religious propaganda, and thus it is no wonder that easy access to Delphi was so important to the Athenians and that they continued to consult the oracle even during the war years.

DIVINATION AND THE SICILIAN EXPEDITION

Although Thucydides neglects to tell us so, on the eve of the Sicilian expedition the Athenians consulted three of the most authoritative

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oracles known to them: the oracle of Zeus Ammon at Siwah Oasis in Libya (Plutarch, *Nicias* 13 and 14), the oracle of Zeus at Dodona in Epirus (Pausanias 8.11.12), and the oracle of Apollo at Delphi (Plutarch, *Mor.* 403B; *Nicias* 13). Even if the answers as we have them may show signs of subsequent embroidery, the fact of the consultations need not be doubted.⁴⁰ The Athenian general Cimon had attempted to consult Zeus Ammon in 451 (Plutarch, *Cimon* 18), and Dodona had served during the war years as a convenient alternative, or supplement, to Delphi. Indeed, it was probably during the period 431–429 that the oracle at Dodona gave its approval for the establishment of a shrine of the Thracian goddess Bendis in the Piraeus.⁴¹ So there was nothing unusual in consulting those oracles in addition to Delphi, and consulting more than one oracle on the same issue was also not without precedent.⁴² The response from Delphi, at least in its apocryphal form, contained a warning. The Athenians were told to fetch the priestess of Athena from Erythrae (or Clazomenae), and her name turned out to be Hesychia (Quiet). They should have taken heed.

As preparations were being made for the Sicilian expedition, nearly all of the herms in the city were mutilated on a single night. The identity and motives of the perpetrators are notoriously difficult problems.⁴³ We cannot even be sure that they were non-believers with no fear of divine wrath; for the act of mutilation can be seen as a pledge, or shared crime, among the participants that required a perverse type of courage.⁴⁴ Or perhaps their opposition to the expedition was so strong that they were even willing to incur divine punishment.

The question of motive is made particularly opaque by Thucydides' neglect of the religious background to the debate over launching the Sicilian expedition. Given that the proponents of the expedition had prevailed in the battle of oracles (see below), it may have seemed that only a spectacular religious action could prevent it. What is clear, however, is the intensity of the Athenian reaction. Thucydides says (6.27): 'The people took the affair very seriously. For it seemed both to be an omen for the expedition and, at the same time, to have been done with a view to a conspiracy and the putting down of the people.' The inseparability of politics and religion is itself encoded in this single dense and intertwined formulation. Yet Thucydides does not explain in what sense the mutilation was an omen. I think that it is fair to infer that the perpetrators consciously solicited a bad omen for the expedition. Or to look at it from the point of view of the demos, the god Hermes, the very god who protected travelers, would have been angered by this impiety.⁴⁵ Expiation for the sacrilege and appeasement of the wronged deity could only be achieved by imposing the harshest possible penalty on the guilty. The