Oracles, Religious Practices And Philosophy In Late Neoplatonism

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One of the most significant foundations of Neoplatonism is the idea that philosophy as an intellectual discipline cannot be separated from the way in which one lives. Platonists taught that the pursuit of wisdom requires the purification of body and soul – otherwise, the soul will be distracted or contaminated. The later Platonists, particularly Proclus and Iamblichus, made extensive use of ritual and polytheistic religious practices, which they considered to be a requirement for the purification of the soul and an aid for attaining union with divinity. In his biography of his master, Marinus presents Proclus’ life as being completely infused with reverence for the divine, and there is a constant emphasis on ritual practice as essential to the philosophical life. Iamblichus and Porphyry also frequently discuss the significance of oracles and religious practices in their writings. Late Neoplatonic praxis inherently embodied a ‘spiritual’ discipline and worship of the gods which was viewed by its practitioners as an integral part of the philosophical life; it represents a worldview that is greatly misunderstood, and, therefore, often unjustly dismissed and neglected by contemporary Western society. This paper will examine the way in which oracles and ritual practices were used by the Neoplatonists, the reasons that such practices were considered so important and their relationship with philosophy. There is also evidence for earlier philosophers corroborating these views, which, although not mentioned explicitly, are alluded to in numerous ways: this evidence will also be briefly examined.

Marinus presents Proclus’ life as constantly permeated by divinity and the biographer emphasises his teacher’s extensive inclusion of ritual practices in his life. According to Marinus, it was Proclus’ tutelary goddess, Rhea, who acted as the main catalyst for his ‘philosophical’ life by appearing to him in a dream and exhorting him to go to Athens to study philosophy (Marinus, Life of Proclus, Chapters 6, 9). The practice of theurgy (which literally means, ‘god-working’), a type of religious ritual which was designed to attain union with the divine (anagogé) and the Chaldaean Oracles, a mystical collection of oracles, were two key types of ritual praxis endorsed by both Iamblichus and Proclus. Marinus describes Proclus’ ritual observances:

‘The purificatory virtues...separate and liberate them from the truly leaden world of generation and produce an uncurbed flight from the present world. And it was these that the philosopher pursued throughout the whole of his life, eloquently explaining in his discourses what they are and how one comes to possess these also, and living strictly in accordance with them, doing on all occasions the things that produce separation for the soul. Day and night he made use of apotropaic, lustratory and other purifications, sometimes the Orphic, sometimes the Chaldaean, going down to the sea without fear at the beginning of every month...and this he did not only in the prime of his life, but even as he was approaching the evening of his life he observed these customs unceasingly, as though they were mandatory.’ (Marinus, Life of Proclus, Chapter 18).

One should understand here that, in traditional Graeco-Roman religion, salt water was thought to purify the religious participant. This is just one example of Proclus’ ritual activity reported by Marinus. The biographer also tells us that when Proclus was a youth, he spontaneously worshipped the moon goddess at the propitious time. He also celebrated the rites of the Great Mother Goddess (the Phrygian goddess Cybele) and constantly performed theurgy, the ritual practice espoused by the Chaldaean Oracles (Marinus, Life of Proclus, Chapters 11, 19, 26, 28).

Iamblichus was also an active advocate of ritual practices: indeed, his main surviving work, On the Mysteries of the Egyptians, Chaldaeans and Assyrians, is an apologia for the practice of theurgy and examines the theological, philosophical and theurgical basis for ritual, worship of the gods and divination. The biographer Eunapius asserts that Iamblichus, ‘gained an easy access to the ears of the gods,’ had a multitude of followers and sometimes performed certain rites alone, when he worshipped the Divine Being (Eunapius, Lives of the Philosophers and Sophists, 458a). This seems to refer to theurgic ritual, which encompassed divination.

Indeed, even the earlier Platonist philosopher Porphyry, a disciple of Plotinus and a learned polymath, seems to have considered religious practices to be an essential consideration for the true philosopher. Porphyry wrote a work entitled Philosophy from Oracles, which survives only in fragments which are reported in the works of various Church Fathers such as Eusebius and Augustine. Eusebius quotes a section of the prologue of Porphyry’s Philosophy from Oracles, which reveals something about Porphyry’s intention in using oracles:

‘For I myself call the gods to witness, that I have neither added anything, nor taken away from the meaning of the responses [i.e. oracles], except where I have corrected an erroneous phrase, or made a change for greater clearness, or completed the metre when defective, or struck out anything that did not conducel to the purpose; so that I preserved the sense of what

\[1\] The original title of the work is The Reply of the Master Abammon to the Letter of Porphyry to Anebo, and the Solutions to the Questions it Contains. However the text has been known as On the Mysteries since Ficino gave it the title De mysteriis Aegyptiorum, Chaldaorum, Assyriorum, in the fifteenth century. Cf. E.C. Clarke, J.M. Dillon and J.P. Hershbell (2003), xliviii.
was spoken untouched, guarding against the impiety of such changes...” (Porphyry, Philosophy from Oracles, F303 (Smith) in: Eusebius, Preparation for the Gospel, IV.7).

In the first and last lines of this fragment, Porphyry clearly asserts that to change the inherent meaning of oracular responses would be impious, demonstrating clearly his reverence for the gods since all oracles were thought to be divine utterances. Porphyry continues his prologue by stating that:

‘And our present collection will contain a record of many doctrines of philosophy, according as the gods declared the truth to be; but to a small extent we shall also touch upon the practice of divination, such as will be useful both for contemplation, and for the general purification of life. And the utility which this collection possesses will be best known to as many as have ever been in travail with truth, and prayed that by receiving the manifestation of it from the gods they might gain relief from their perplexity by virtue of the trustworthy teaching of the speakers.’ (Porphyry, Philosophy from Oracles, F303 (Smith) in: Eusebius, Preparation for the Gospel, IV.7).

Here Porphyry claims that an accurate interpretation of traditional oracles could help the philosopher in his search for salvation and divine truth. This introductory programmatic statement, and indeed the title itself (the Philosophy to be derived from Oracles) clearly show Porphyry’s conviction that philosophical truth and insight could be received through oracles, the key religious practice through which gods spoke to mortals in traditional Graeco-Roman religion. Bidez’ view that Porphyry wrote this book in his youth before he had become a disciple of Plotinus and consequently, when he was more superstitious and less rational, is now largely discounted by scholars (Bidez, 1913, 19-20. For the rejection of Bidez’ view cf. O’Meara, 1959, 34; Smith, 1987, 717, 773, 733; Beatrice, 1992, 350). Indeed, Porphyry’s Life of Plotinus, the biography of his master which was written by the philosopher in his old age, culminates in a long, poetical oracle about the fate of Plotinus’ soul (Porphyry, Life of Plotinus, Chapter 22). According to Porphyry, this prophetic verse came from an Oracle of Apollo, and although he does not explicitly report whether this oracle came from Delphi, Didyma or some other oracular shrine, it seems quite likely that this oracle came from Apollo’s Delphic Oracle.3 Many scholars still see a fundamental division between Porphyry, as a follower of the ‘rationalistic’ Plotinus, and more ‘mystical’ or ‘superstitious’ Platonists such as Iamblichus and Proclus (Edwards, 1991; Dodds, 1951). However, Porphyry’s Life of Plotinus contains a very interesting account of an incident in Plotinus’ school, where at the celebration of Plato’s birthday, Porphyry read a poem entitled The Sacred Marriage of which he says:

‘...because many things were mystically and enigmatically stated in a rapturous style, someone exclaimed that Porphyry was raving; but he [i.e. Plotinus] said in the hearing of all: ‘You have proved yourself simultaneously a poet, a philosopher and a teacher of sacred truth (hierophantes)’ (Porphyry, Life of Plotinus, Chapter 15).

Whether or not one agrees that Plotinus actually said these things or even if the incident occurred at all, it certainly strongly indicates the way in which Porphyry wished to be viewed: not just as a conceptual philosopher, but as a poet and a hierophant, a priest. Additionally, in Porphyry’s Letter to Marcella, we see the philosopher advocating the observance of traditional religious rites:

‘The chief fruit of piety is to honour God according to the laws of our country... we are not harmed by reverencing God’s altars, nor benefited by neglecting them...’ (Porphyry, Letter to Marcella, Chapter 15).

This may constitute only a very cautious approval of traditional religion, but in the same treatise Porphyry speaks of philosophy in connection with divine rites when advising his wife Marcella:

‘...deem it no trivial matter to remember these words by which you were with divine rites initiated into true philosophy, approving by your deeds the fidelity with which they have been apprehended. For it is a man’s actions that naturally afford demonstrations of his opinions, and whoever holds a belief must live in accordance with it...’ (Porphyry, Letter to Marcella, Chapter 8).

Here, not only does Porphyry connect divine rites with philosophy, but he also emphasises the importance of experience and action in true philosophy. Thus, we have seen that Porphyry, Iamblichus and Proclus all viewed religious and ritual practices, including oracles, as important concomitants to philosophy: they all believed, to a greater or lesser extent, that religious practice was a vital part of the true philosophical life.

Why were ritual and religious practices such as these considered so important by these Neoplatonist philosophers? In order to understand the integration of polytheistic religious phenomena (which contemporary western society often views as ‘irrational superstition’) with ‘philosophy,’ it is important to consider Neoplatonic views about the nature of truth, the hierarchical structure of the universe and the idea of sympatheia, similar to the microcosm-macrocosm view of the cosmos. These ideas, which were inherent in the Neoplatonic worldview, are key in understanding how religious practices were seen as part of a philosophical life.

To begin with, it is vital to understand that for the Neoplatonists, the idea of truth is hierarchical: there are

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2 Fragments from Porphyry’s Philosophy from Oracles are primarily preserved in the works of Eusebius and Augustine, although some fragments are preserved by John Philoponus, Firmicus Maternus, Theodoret and in the anonymous Tbingen Theosophy. Cf. A. Smith (1993), 351-407.

3 Ibid, Chapter 22. Before quoting the Oracle on Plotinus, Porphyry quotes an extract from Herodotus’ Histories, 1.47, which are words reported by Herodotus as coming from the Oracle of Apollo at Delphi. Cf. Edwards (2000), 40, n.226-228.
different ontological levels of truth, or reality, in the cosmos. The goal of philosophy, according to the Neoplatonists, is to reach the highest levels of truth possible and thus to attain union with divinity, since they believed that truth is divine, following the Platonic definition of truth as universal, eternal (and therefore immortal) and unchanging. This point is very important, since what the Neoplatonists meant by ‘truth’ is far more than merely being the result of empirical and mechanistic logic which is often taken today as a definition of ‘truth.’

The later Platonists thought that discursive thought could only go so far: the highest level of truth could only be gained by direct experience of the divine, in other words the performance of ritual and the comprehension of oracles, which acted as direct links to divinity. Damascius, one of the first of the Platonic philosophers, asserted that those who practice philosophy without performing rituals of purification and initiation will never bring their souls into union with divinity (Damascius, In Phaed, I.168). Iamblichus emphasised that theurgical rituals and oracular practices give mortals the direct experiential necessity to induce pure vision of the highest levels of truth. He also emphasised the fact that divine possession, and thus oracular activity, come from the gods. The highest level of truth is divinely bestowed upon mortals and can only be acquired by experiencing divinity in a direct way rather than by the conceptual word play of discursive thinking:

‘It is not pure thought that unites theurgists to the gods. Indeed what then would hinder those who are theoretical philosophers from enjoying a theurgical union with the gods? But the situation is not so: it is the accomplishment of acts not to be divulged and beyond all conception, and the power of the unutterable symbols, understood solely by the gods, which establishes theurgic union. Hence, we do not bring about these things by intellection alone; for thus their efficacy would be intellectual, and dependent upon us. But neither assumption is true.’ [my italics] (Iamblichus, De Mysteriis, II.11 (96.13-97.4).

Gregory Shaw eruditely explains that Iamblichus is describing a process by which the god acts through the philosopher-theurgist, who becomes a vehicle for a deeper reality, a god (Shaw, 2004). To explain this another way, discursive thinking works within a dualistic framework, trapping the thinker within the subject-object dichotomy as knowing the ‘other’ as ‘other’ so it could never lead to a complete union with the divine (Shaw, 1995, 96). However, the act of discursive thought is a vital preparation for theurgy; the theurgist must also be a philosopher:

‘Effective union certainly never takes place without knowledge, but nevertheless it is not identical with it. Thus, divine purity does not come about through right knowledge…but divine union and purification actually go beyond knowledge.’ (Iamblichus, De Mysteriis, II.11 (98.6-10).

The most profound levels of truth can therefore be experienced by humans only in moments of divine inspiration. Iamblichus describes divine possession as coming from the gods:

‘Divine possession is not a human action nor does its power rest on human attributes or actions, for these are otherwise receptively disposed and the god uses them as his instruments. The god completes the entire work of divination by himself…with neither the soul nor the body being moved at all, the god acts by himself…’ (Iamblichus, De Mysteriis, III.7 (115.3-7). Translation is that of Shaw (2004), 5).

Thus, according to Iamblichus, prophetic experiences transcend our modes of discourse (Shaw, 2004, 5); through oracular ‘inspiration’ the gods give humans unified and complete insight. Plato expresses this idea in the Phaedrus:

‘The greatest of blessings come to us through madness, when it is sent as a gift of the gods.’ (Plato, Phaedrus, 244a8-9).

The first type of mania, or ‘madness’ discussed by Socrates in this dialogue after the above statement, is divination. Socrates also includes poetry as a type of mania which is a divine gift, clarifying the ancient practice of invoking the Muses at the beginning of every poem. Plato then contrasts this type of ‘divine inspiration’ which is entirely god-given with rational and discursive faculties:

‘So also, when they gave a name to the investigation of the future which rational persons conduct through observation of birds and by other signs, since they furnish mind and information to human thought from the intellect they called it the oionostic art…The ancients, then testify that in proportion as prophecy (mántikē) is superior to augury, both in name and in fact, in the same proportion madness, which comes from god is superior to sanity, which is of human origin.’ (Plato, Phaedrus, 244c4 - d7).

Plato speaks of this contrast in terms of the difference between prophecy and augury, or ‘inspired’ and ‘inductive’ modes of divination.

How did rituals and oracular practices actually work? Neoplatonism is based on a ‘locative view of the cosmos,’ which is founded on five basic principles: firstly, there is a cosmic order that permeates every level of reality (or ‘truth’), secondly, this cosmic order is the divine society of the gods, thirdly, the structure and dynamics of this society can be discerned in the movements and patterned juxtapositions of the heavenly bodies, fourthly: human society should be a microcosm of the divine society and finally, the chief responsibility of priests is to attain human order to the divine world (Smith,1978, 132). As an extension of this, a key element in the Neoplatonist worldview is the concept of cosmic sympathy (sympathêia), the idea that everything in the universe is connected and different truths are reflected in different ontological levels of the universe in the way most appropriate or fitting to that level. Consequently, the later Platonists used physical objects, such as plants, herbs and incantations, in their theurgic practices because these objects, or symbola (symbols), were thought to contain divinity and to express particular divine
truths. For example, the sun, the lion and the sunflower were all symbola of the god Apollo-Helios, according to Proclus (Proclus, *On the Hieratic Art*, 150.10-15). Gregory Shaw points out that theryug is founded on the Platonic theory of Recollection, where the symbola acted as ‘memory-prods’ for the Forms, evoking a memory of the primary and divine principles in the humans who used them (Shaw, 1995, 24). Thus through religious ritual the later Platonists used symbola to ‘tap into’ divine reality and open themselves in a direct way to the powers of the gods. Oracles, uttered by those who were divinely inspired, can also be considered as symbola, using ‘divine’ words to give insight into truth. Since oracles were thought to derive ultimately from the gods themselves, the wisdom and truth contained within them allowed mortals a very direct access to divinity.

At the beginning of this paper I mentioned that some earlier philosophers seemed to corroborate these views. The most obvious example is Plutarch, a Middle Platonist philosopher, biographer and historian. Plutarch was a priest at Delphi, the most famous and renowned oracle centre in the ancient world. He wrote various dialogues about the operation of the Delphic Oracle, which express his philosophical ideas about the foundation of Delphi (Plutarch, *The Oracles at Delphi* (De Pythiae Oraculis); *The Obsolescence of Oracles* (De Defectu Oraculorum); *The E at Delphi* (De E apud Delphos). All treatises are contained in Plutarch, *Moralia*, Volume V, Loeb edn.). Hence, Plutarch evidently considered religion and philosophy to constitute the same spectrum of truth and formed connective modes of honouring the gods. Additionally, the ideas underlying the ritual and oracular practices endorsed by the late Platonists seem to at least stem from Plato’s philosophical doctrines. For instance, the Theory of Forms and the Theory of Recollection underlie and indeed make possible the ideas of sympatheia and symbola. Plato’s view of the Ideal City as corresponding to the harmonious and perfectly balanced soul in the Republican could be seen as an expression of sympatheia; at the very least it encapsulates the microcosm-macrocosm idea so essential to theurgic ritual.

Thus, for the later Platonists oracular and ritual practices were the culmination of the philosophical life, allowing the philosopher direct access to divine truth which was considered unattainable by discursive, conceptual thinking alone. By combining rational thought with practices that honoured and imitated the divine order, the Platonists believed they could gain union with divinity. The subject of this paper is a vast, complex and profound area; however I hope to have given an introduction to some of the key ideas of the late Platonists which lay at the heart of their ideal of a truly philosophical life lived in accordance with the gods.

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