From the mouth of Apollo

As the newly inducted High Priest of Apollo, it is my pleasure to mark the holy festival of Pyanopsia with this historical tribute to those who have brought about the final and irrevocable triumph of truth over science.

Things were not always so joyous. Even in the ancient world, where the wisdom, justice and veracity of the sacred Oracle of Delphi were universally acknowledged, there was no guarantee that mankind would heed its advice. The leaders of Sparta, Athens, Macedon and other great lands of antiquity often substituted their own wilful misinterpretations of the Oracle's prophecies for its actual words. They led their armies in futile and catastrophic wars. Victories achieved in defiance of divine ordinance were invariably bitter and short-lived. Usually, the unnecessary suffering incurred was itself foretold by the Oracle, even if its poetic formulae were only fully understood many years after the events which it predicted.

While battles raged, philosophy and the arts flourished. From Apollo's acrid vapours, belched from the entrails of the Earth, came forth visionary beauty and apodictic enlightenment. Yet, by the dawn of the Christian and Scientific Era (CSE), the silencing of the shrine at Delphi had become the principal aim of all those who sought political power, from Roman Emperors such as Hadrian, to the barbarian hordes descending from Gaul and Thrace. The prophetic power of Apollo, subdued by force, was gradually replaced by the frail and fallible voice of human reasoning. After the lips of the Pythia were shut tight by order of the Emperor Theodosius in 393 CSE, the world was to endure almost two millennia of darkness.

Amazing as it may seem, little more than a century ago, ancient Hellenic wisdom was regarded as no more than a quaint relic of a mythical past. The name 'Apollo' merely conjured memories of the odyssey to the moon, undertaken by the former

United States of America. In contrast, science was considered to be the explanation of everything: almost the very opposite of what we know today. The preceding centuries had witnessed the growing power of so-called scientific rationalism, accompanied by slaughter and destruction on an unimaginable scale. Yet, humanity failed to see any connection between these trends.

The tide began to turn only in the twenty-first century of the CSE when science was put directly to the test. Its manifest fallacies and uncertainties awakened humanity to the superiority of the ancient ways. The crucial event in this shift of opinion was the failure of self-appointed scientific 'experts' to predict the devastating earthquake in the Roman province of Aquila (then part of Italy) in 2009 CSE. This negligence was judged to have led to the deaths of hundreds of innocent people and the destruction of much of the city's architectural splendour. Those indicted for this crime offered as their defence the assertion that 'science is unable to predict the occurrence of earthquakes'. In retrospect, this admission contributed as much to the decline of faith in science as did the actual failure to warn the citizens of the doomed city of the impending disaster.

It was more or less at the same time as these events unfolded, that the cult of Apollo was quietly re-established at Delphi. Greece had been wracked for several years by an unprecedented economic and social crisis. In desperation, the people looked for salvation to all manner of eccentric cults, including Communism, neo-Nazism, anarchism and astrology, before finally turning back to their own antique tradition.

The Oracle was soon put to the test, with spectacular results. Its pronouncements on the very topics upon which science had failed to provide satisfactory answers cemented its growing reputation as the only reliable source of truth in the world. Its words pointed clearly to the terrible

climactic upheaval, the accompanying wars, epidemics, floods and famines, culminating in two of the most destructive volcanic eruptions ever witnessed. Scientists had warned about these events only in the most generic manner. The counter-claim that science raises more questions than answers simply highlighted humanity's pressing need for answers to those questions. Delphi was ideally placed to supply those answers.

One reason for the long-term demise of public confidence in science was the fact that scientists could never agree on anything among themselves. This cacophony of opinions provided no help to a world faced with the devastating effects of climate change, environmental decline and infectious disease. Indeed, these perils can be considered as the fruits of scientific research. Scientists wasted huge amounts of time and resources on so-called peer review, supposedly judging the validity of each others' claims, before anything could be published or public money disbursed. Perhaps things would have turned out differently if they had adopted the far more efficient procedure that is compulsory for today's philosophers, whereby all manuscripts and funding applications are submitted to the Oracle for a simple yes/no decision.

These events are now commemorated by the shrine recently established in Aquila. According to legend, the earthquake that wreaked such destruction upon the ancient town was seismically connected to the stirrings of Apollo himself, in the great fissure at Delphi. In the space of a few short years, the Aquiline Apollo has become the most visited devotional site in the world. Standing watch over the Academy of Aesthetics, Healing and Archery (formerly the University of L'Aquila), the statue bears witness to the triumph of certainty over doubt.

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