Religion As A Basis Of Ancient Greek Culture

Religion was the basis of Ancient Greek culture. A polytheistic faith, its gods and goddesses dictated the civilisation's actions, thoughts and beliefs, whilst also providing protection to its many city states. Belief in these deities was reinforced through ritual practices and architecture, with mythology and temples still paying testimony to the far-reaching influence of the Ancient Greek religion over 2000 years later.

Ancient Greek religious tradition was an early form of Paganism, and varied greatly to modern belief systems as it had no sacred texts, revelations or creed; it focused on doing rather than believing. While there was no hierarchy within the religion, there existed priests and oracles who had liturgical and administrative duties. Ancient Greek religion was solely based upon the existence of various Gods and Goddesses, the most important of which were the Olympian gods, led by Zeus. These gods the mythological stories of their lives dictated Ancient Greek ritual practice and explained aspects of the unknown. The worship of the gods was important, as it was believed that by doing so, one would receive protection and gifts from them. The act of honouring the gods was not practiced as means of acquiring benefits after death, however the idea of an afterlife and what it entailed was important to the religion. It was thought that once dead, the soul would be taken to the Underworld, of which Hades was king. The soul would go to one of three places depending on its behaviour while alive; Elysium, for the good; Tartarus, for the bad; and Asphodel Fields, for those whose sins and goodness were equal. If the deceased was not properly buried, they would haunt the Earth forever as a ghost. Fate was a central belief, and not even the gods could alter their destiny. The idea of an 'ultimate reality' contradicted many aspects within the religion, however it remained a mainstay within it. These beliefs were the very basis of Ancient Greek religion and society, dictating religious practices and ritual.

Mythology and the characters within it were means of explaining everything in Ancient Greece. These stories were originally told orally, created by poets Homer and Hesiod in the 8th century BC. They began at the beginning, telling of the Earth's creation once deities Gaia, Tartarus, and Eros emerged from light, and Gaia and Chaos procreated, shaping everything known and unknown in the universe . Besides the creation story, mythology explained many other phenomena, presented through the legends of various gods and goddesses. These deities were anthropomorphic, and all ruled over a particular aspect of life. Unlike gods within modern religions, they were often portrayed as being amoral, which is why they were not turned to for moral guidance by followers of the religion. These deities were often related, the family model meaning civilians could better relate to and understand what mythology was explaining. Though there were a plethora of mythological beings, the most important in the Ancient Greek religion were the twelve Olympian Gods. T hese gods were led by Zeus, and are thought to have been worshipped since the Bronze Age. Deities could also be alive; oracles, who were conduits of gods, were pursued by citizens for advice and assistance. Deities and stories of their lives shaped not only the entire Ancient Greek religion, but the society too. The gods and the mythological stories of their lives were used in all aspects of Ancient Greek life, meaning the ideas, architecture and rituals that emerged from the nation largely revolved around the themes within mythology. These stories had such an integral place in society that the myths still exist over a millennium later, and still have a central place within modern society.

The worship of deities and celebration of religion was an integral part of Ancient Greek culture . Elements of religious worship included prayer, libations, sacrifice and offerings. Sacred spaces within Ancient Greece were an omnipresent tenet of the society ; they were a physical manifestation of the religion's gods and goddesses. Unlike modern religions, temples were not a place of worship and public access to these sites was restricted. They were often situated near water to promote cleanliness and purity, and served as homes for a place's patron god or goddess and their treasures. Worship was required to take place outdoors, so it was typically carried out at altars outside of the temple. At these altars, sacrificial rituals took place, where an animal was slaughtered as offering to gods. Sacrifice was the central ritual of the religion and served one of three functions; to honour; to thank; or to request a favour from the gods. Often, these rituals were the only time people would consume meat. Festivals were also another major form of worship, the most important being the Panathenaea, which included music, poetry and sporting competitions, and celebrated the presentation of the 'peplos' (new dress) to the goddess Athena. The most famous of Ancient Greek festivals is the Olympics, which were held in honour of Zeus, leader of the Olympian gods. While worship was often elaborate, religion was still practiced in daily life. Followers of Ancient Greek religion would often pray at home and visit temples, and libations were performed as daily offerings to the gods. The worship of gods was a key function within Ancient Greek society as it was believed that doing so would ensure gifts and protection for them. The methods of worship were integral to daily life, and shaped the civilisation.

The Ancient Greek religion provided its followers with a purpose that transcended their human existence. The existence of gods and the desire to please them gave people within Ancient Greece something to strive for, and a reason to behave in a morally responsible manner. The rituals performed also created a sense of community and belonging amongst the religion's followers. The development of mythology was a distinctive response to the Greeks' search for meaning. The story medium was both simple to understand, and limitless in its contents, meaning every facet of the universe and humanity could be explained, even abstract themes such as emotions, without enmity. Spiritual needs within Ancient Greece were fulfilled through the practice of the religion as it provided a purpose, as well as meaning. The unpredictable nature of the religion meant spiritual needs were fulfilled, whilst still leaving scope for the pursuit of deeper spiritual explanation. While the Greek religion was dissimilar to modern religious traditions, its function to provide meaning for its followers is much the same.

Religion was fundamental to Ancient Greece and its culture. Every aspect of Ancient Greek society was pervaded with religion to an extent unseen in the modern world; it was impossible to not be affected by its far-reaching influence. The malleable nature of the religion and its mythology, rituals, and temples, as well as its ability to suit societal needs, was why it was so widely practiced; it provided a sense of stability within a chaotic world.