

Articles

The Impiety of Socrates

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One day in 399 BC Socrates went on trial in Athens, charged with impiety and corrupting the young, and spoke certain words to the jury in his defence. Some time later—no-one knows how much time later—Plato wrote *The Apology of Socrates*, in which Socrates again speaks certain words to the jury in his defence.

No sensible scholar believes that the relation between the first set of words and the second is the relation of identity. It is most unlikely that what Socrates said and what Plato wrote are exactly the same, if only for the trivial reason that unprepared spoken discourse very seldom comes out as a sequence of syntactically perfect, complete sentences.¹ The written and the spoken speeches could of course be partly the same. Plato could have preserved the gist of what Socrates said and re-presented it in his own inimitable prose. That indeed is what many scholars think the *Apology* does. But it is equally possible that Plato, like Xenophon and perhaps others as well,² devised his own independent defence of Socrates, that had little or nothing in common with what Socrates said on the day.

The scholarly literature on this topic is a paradise of inconclusive guesswork. I have no new guesses to offer here. Instead, I want to propose another way of reading Plato's *Apology*. Rather than taking the text as a historical challenge and wondering about its relation to what Socrates actually said on the day, or, more generally, about whether it gives a historically faithful account of Socrates' life and thought, I suggest that it would be more appropriate to the present occasion, and to everything George Steiner has stood witness for over the years, to read it as a personal challenge.³

If the words spoken by Socrates in the written defence are not identical with the words spoken by Socrates on the day of his trial, then the jury to which the

¹ We need not believe either Xenophon's statement (*Apol.* 4) that Socrates was prevented by his 'divine sign' from preparing the defence beforehand, or the report in Diogenes Laertius ii 40 that he turned down an offer from Lysias to write the speech for him. It is nevertheless evident that the interrogation of Meletus at 24c-28a could not have been fully prepared ahead of time, yet syntactic propriety is preserved as beautifully as in any Platonic dialogue, even with the audience interrupting at 27b. The same holds for Socrates' response to the verdict (35e ff.). It would be absurd to try to read the *Apology* as a verbatim transcript of the spoken speech.

² Xen. *Apol.* 1 refers to others (plural) who have written about Socrates' defence and death, but gives no indication as to who they were or the character of their writings, save that they all conveyed the lofty (or haughty) tone (μεγαληγορία) of his speech.

³ 'The present occasion' refers to a colloquium at Geneva in honour of George Steiner. This address in a slightly different version originally appeared in the colloquium proceedings, Dykman and Godzich 1996, 13-36.

written defence is addressed need not be identical with the jury of 501 (or 500) male Athenians to whom the spoken defence was addressed. Plato's writing the *Apology* in the form of a defence speech by Socrates puts the reader—any reader—in the position of juror. To read the *Apology*, whether in ancient times or today, is to be challenged to pass judgement on Socrates.

He is charged with impiety and corrupting the young. Is he guilty or not guilty? And if he is guilty, what should the punishment be? How would you have voted if you had been on the jury in 399 BC? How in your imagination do you vote now?

This, I propose, is the challenge the written defence presents to its reader, by virtue of the forensic form—the standard form of a court speech—that Plato gave it. Xenophon's *Apology*, by contrast, is plain narrative, like an investigating journalist's account of the trial, with soundbites from the most dramatic moments of Socrates' speech and interviews with various interested parties. Plato's *Apology* opens with one of the common forms of address to jury or assembly, 'You, men of Athens' (ὦ ἄνδρες Ἀθηναῖοι),⁴ and continues throughout in the forensic mode we are used to from surviving speeches of Lysias or Demosthenes. This is decidedly not a dialogue. Readers are not invited, as the dialogues properly so called invite us, to join in a philosophical discussion about virtue, knowledge, and reality. We are invited to reach a verdict on the case before us.

Very well. Let us start reading. At the end of the first paragraph (18a) Socrates says that the virtue (ἀρετή) of a jurymen, what a good jurymen will do, is to concentrate his mind on the justice of the defence he will present. The manner and rhetorical skill with which it is presented should be disregarded. In other words, if you are sitting—in reality or in imagination—on this jury, the only thing that should weigh with you is the justice of the case.

Imagine, then, that you are a good member of the jury in the sense defined. You already know something of Socrates' activities, from listening to him in person or from reading the dialogues of Plato. How, let me ask, do you now think you would have voted then? Guilty or not guilty?

[At this point the audience in Geneva voted 'Not guilty' by a majority of many to one. Other audiences in Durham, Lille, and London, and in biennial lectures at Cambridge, have invariably voted 'Not guilty' also, though not always by so dramatic a margin.]

In 399 BC the vote was something like 280 against Socrates, 221 in favour. If only 30 votes had gone the other way, he would have been acquitted (36a).⁵ All the same, 280 or so to find him guilty is a large number of people.

⁴ The main alternative, 'Gentlemen of the jury' (ὦ ἄνδρες δικασταί), is used only in Socrates' valedictory address to the jurors who voted against the death penalty (40a, 40e, 41c); they have earned the title 'juror'.

⁵ On the problems of determining the exact figures, see the still unsurpassed edition by Burnet 1924, *ad loc.*

They will not all have voted ‘Guilty’ for exactly the same reasons.⁶ Some, perhaps, were motivated by political hostility to Socrates, because of his association with Alcibiades and the tyrant Critias; others perhaps by malice, having had the unpleasant experience of being made to look a fool by Socrates’ questioning; others again may have been swayed by the caricature of Socrates in Aristophanes’ *Clouds*, which Socrates at 18a-19c says is the chief prejudice he has to combat. But how far do these still standard explanations take us?

Socrates says that many of the jury have heard him talking and know the sorts of things he says (17c, 19d). Many of you have read him talking in Plato’s dialogues and know the sorts of things he says. They know—you know—he is not like the Socrates of Aristophanes’ *Clouds* who studies things in the heavens and under the earth and who teaches people to make the weaker argument the stronger (19b-c). Socrates was such a familiar figure in the community, for so many years, that we have to probe deeper.

Imagine a reasonably conscientious member of the jury: one who has heard Socrates in discussion, who understands the difference between him and the Socrates of the *Clouds*, who is not activated by political vengefulness or personal malice, who concentrates as a good jurymen should on thinking exclusively about the justice of the defence Socrates offers. Someone who genuinely cares about the welfare of the city and about whether it is good or bad for the young to listen to Socrates. My question is: Could *such* a person have voted to find Socrates guilty of impiety and corrupting the young?

I want to suggest that the answer is ‘Yes’. Indeed, that we shall not understand Socrates, or the enormous and permanent impact he has had on human thought, unless we realize that he was guilty of the impiety charge for which he was condemned. But first, a word of caution.

Socrates’ impact on subsequent thought is due largely to the writings of Plato, so it is the Socrates of the writings of Plato we have to understand, and that same Socrates whose guilt I propose to argue for. This will be no historical hypothesis about the flesh-and-blood snubnosed personality who died in 399 BC, but an invitation to make your own imaginative judgement on the literary Socrates whose defence Plato immortalized in the *Apology*, perhaps many years later.

The exact charge is specified at 24b: Socrates ἄδικεῖ (does wrong, sc. to the city) by corrupting the youth and not believing in the gods (θεοί) which the city believes in but other new divinities (δαίμονια καινά). I suggest it is true that Socrates does not believe in the gods the city believes in, and that a large part of what is involved in his corrupting the young is that they end up not believing in them either (so 26b and *Euthyphro* 3a-b). Part of my evidence is that the written defence never rebuts this part of the charge. Nowhere in the *Apology* does Socrates say he does believe in the gods the city believes in.

He proves to his prosecutor Meletus that if he believes in new δαίμονια

⁶ For more on the importance of this point, see my review of Stone 1988.

(divinities) he believes in gods, because δαίμονες are θεοί (gods) (27a-28a). On the strength of this proof he claims the indictment is self-contradictory: it says that Socrates does not believe in gods but believes in gods (27a). The question before the jury, however, is whether Socrates believes in the gods the city believes in, not whether he believes in gods. Socrates makes fun of Meletus for confusing him with Anaxagoras and claiming he says the sun is a stone and the moon earth, not gods as other people believe (26d-e). But he does not say he does believe that the sun and moon are gods.

He *refers* constantly to ὁ θεός, which can mean ‘god’ in a generic sense or ‘the god’. It is ὁ θεός who told Chaerephon at Delphi that no-one is wiser than Socrates (21b), which Socrates eventually interprets to mean that ὁ θεός has ordered him to philosophize, testing himself and others (28e-29a; cf. 33c). It is also ὁ θεός who is responsible for Socrates’ ‘divine sign’, that mysterious inner voice which from time to time warns him off something he is about to do (31c-d, 40b). Since the first mention of ὁ θεός is the phrase ‘ὁ θεός at Delphi’ (20e), the jury will assume he is talking of Apollo. But he never speaks of Apollo by name.

Apollo, of course, is one of the gods the city most centrally believes in. He presides over the basis of its social structure. Each member of the jury can speak of ‘my Apollo Patroos (Ancestral Apollo)’, meaning the altar to Apollo that is focus to the organization of his ‘fratry’ (group of families, subdivision of a tribe) through which he has his citizenship. Apollo is as important at Athens as he is at Delphi. But nowhere in the *Apology* is he mentioned by name.

When interrogating Meletus Socrates makes a point of swearing by Hera (24e), by Zeus (25c, 26e), and by ‘these very gods of whom we are speaking’ (26b). On the other hand, in his address to the jury the only time he names a deity is when he mentions that Achilles’ mother Thetis was a god (θεός, 28c). This is to explain why she could foresee what would happen if he avenged Patroclus; it has nothing to do with Thetis being one of the gods the city believes in. (There is in fact no evidence of Thetis having had a shrine, or any civic role, in ancient Athens.) All the important references to divinity in the *Apology* are indeterminate references to ὁ θεός or, once or twice, to θεοί—‘gods’ in the plural, without the definite article (35d; 41d).⁷ Socrates might as well be speaking of ‘god’ and ‘gods’ in a quite generic sense. He might almost be a monotheist. There is little or nothing to show that *the* gods, the numerous particular and highly individual gods the city believes in, mean anything to Socrates at all. Yet that was the central charge of the indictment, the part on which the rest depends.

How is a conscientious ‘juror-reader’ to interpret Socrates’ silence on the central issue we have to make up our minds about? Would it be unjust to interpret it as an admission that the charge as levelled is true?

What Socrates does say about divinity is as damning as what he does not say. His central theme is that his philosophical activity is undertaken at the bidding of

⁷ I say ‘once or twice’ because at 35d the word θεοί is a semi-quotation from the indictment; in the next and final sentence Socrates restores ὁ θεός in the singular.

ὁ θεός, whom it would be wrong to disobey (23c, 28d-30a, 33c; 37e). That is his interpretation of the oracle. 'Ο θεός wants him to go around Athens asking his questions and showing people they do not know what they think they know. Socrates is a gadfly god-sent to sting the Athenians into caring for virtue above all else (29d-31b; 36c; 41e). And the best way to exercise this care is to spend every day in philosophical discussion about virtue: 'For a human being the unexamined life is not worth living' (38a). 'Ο θεός wants everybody every day to be *questioning*: examining and re-examining the values by which their life is led.

In other words, what divinity minds about, in Socrates' view, is two things: (1) that people should try to be virtuous, (2) that they should realize they do not yet know, but have to find out, what it is to be virtuous. In yet other words, Socrates' divinity lays it down that the accepted values of the Athenian community are to be put in question. Neither in private nor in public life are the Athenians living as they should—the *Apology* is one long counter-indictment charging the Athenians with rampant injustice. Few modern scholars have seen this as clearly as the author of the following excerpt from an ancient rhetorical treatise:

Since we are on the subject of deliberative and judicial speeches, you may also take from Plato examples of further complex disputes, which combine, in some fashion, all the branches of rhetoric. The *Apology of Socrates* has as its primary purpose (πρότασις) an apology, as its title makes clear, but it is also an accusation of the Athenians, seeing that they brought such a man to court. And the bitterness of the accusation is concealed by the moderation (τῷ ἐπιείκει) of the apology; for the things spoken in self-defense are an accusation of the Athenians. These are two strands (συμπλοκαί) in the speech.⁸ A third is this: the speech is an encomium of Socrates, made inoffensive by being covered up as a requirement of self-defense. This is the third strand. The result is two interconnected judicial themes (ὑποθέσεις), the apology and the accusation, together with one encomiastic theme: the praise of Socrates. The fourth strand, which was, as Plato saw it, the most important theme, with a deliberative or counselling function and philosophical content, is this: the book is an exhortatory proclamation (παράγγελμα) of what sort of a person the philosopher ought to be.⁹

Seldom has the *Apology* been summed up so well.

⁸ A bold translation, but forced upon me by the context. The enumeration 'one, two, three' prevents συμπλοκή carrying its normal meaning 'combination'; despite the dictionaries, here it must mean 'element in a combination'.

⁹ From the first of two books 'On figured speeches' (Περὶ ἐσχηματισμένων, date and author unknown) which have come down to us in the corpus of Dionysius of Halicarnassus (Usener and Radermacher 1904-1929, 305.5-23. For the reference and help with the translation, I am indebted to Janet Fairweather.

I am sure this ancient rhetorician is right that accusation is as important a theme as defence. Witness especially the section 31d-32e where Socrates says it would be impossible for anyone who puts justice first to take part in Athenian politics (or democratic politics anywhere) without perishing (cf. also 36b-c). The death sentence at the end of the *Apology* is the most vividly present reminder of how vice and injustice dominate the city (see 39a-d). But everything Socrates says about the value of his philosophic mission is by implication an indictment of the Athenians for resisting the call to virtue. And in making this counter-indictment Socrates claims to be speaking on behalf of divinity. What his divinity wants from the Athenians is their singleminded dedication to justice and virtue.

But would not Zeus want the same? Yes and no. In the *Iliad* Zeus sends Athene to *break* the truce sworn in his name (iv 71-72 with iii 276-280, 298). In due course he will punish the violation he has himself decreed (iv 168, 235-240). Apollo, god of medicine, is also god of the plague. The traditional gods both help and harm in the relationships and activities they are interested in.¹⁰ Socrates' divinity, by contrast, appears to be as singleminded as Socrates.

Now let us return to our conscientious, decent-minded jurors, be they many or few, listeners then or readers today. When they have heard all this that Socrates says about ὁ θεός, they are bound to agree that Socrates is not ἄθεος (godless). It is clearly not the case that he believes in no gods at all, that he has no religious beliefs. But does he believe in the gods that the city believes in? Does he share the religion of the Athenian people? Recall how closely a Greek community's sense of its own identity and stability is bound up with its religious observances and the myths that support them. If Socrates rejects the city's religion, he attacks the city. Conversely, if he says the city has got its public and private life all wrong, he attacks its religion; for its life and its religion are inseparable.¹¹ Let our jurors ask themselves this question: What would be left of traditional (fifth century) religion, hence what would be left of traditional (fifth century) Athenian life, if the city accepted Socrates' view that what divinity demands from human beings is not propitiation and sacrifices, festivals and processions, but the practice of moral philosophy? I submit that our jurors are bound in good conscience to say to themselves: Socrates has a religion, but it is not ours. This is not the religion of the Athenians.

Socrates almost said the same at 35d: 'I believe in gods as do none of my accusers'. These words can be understood to mean that he believes more piously than they do. But they can also be taken to mean that he believes in a different way from them.

Perhaps the most disturbing statement, calculated to make the jury roar, is that Socrates is immune from harm by the court (30c). Nothing they inflict—death, exile, disenfranchisement—will touch him where it counts. Rather, they will be the ones to suffer—from the injustice they will have committed. Even a juror

¹⁰ For more on this principle, I may refer to Padel 1992, esp. 166.

¹¹ One way to gain some sense of this inseparability is to read through Parke 1977.

who does not roar could be disturbed by this. The jury's task, remember, is not to admire Socrates' courage and strength; still less to attempt, as modern scholars do, a rational reconstruction of Socratic moral philosophy. It is to judge whether Socrates does harm to the city he claims cannot do harm to him. And that claim clearly goes against the grain of the traditional culture, as expressed by and mediated through the poets. One of the reasons poetry will be censored in the ideal city of the *Republic* is precisely because the poets instill the idea that a good and just person can suffer harm and tragic loss through divine or human agency and thereby lose their happiness (379d-380b, 387d-e, 392b with 364b; the tale of Zeus and Athene breaking the truce is expunged at 379e).

Socrates' rival claim is not of course that you cannot lose your money, your children, be struck by disease, and so on, but that a good and virtuous person will cope with whatever happens in the best possible way, turning it to something good: 'Virtue does not come from possessions but from virtue possessions and *all other things* come to be good both for individuals and for a city' (30b).¹² And it is clear that one becomes virtuous, in Socrates' view, by one's own efforts, through philosophizing.

Now it is a traditional idea that humans cannot prosper without the help of the gods. The paradigm of hubris (arrogant pride) is the belief that you can. When Ajax boasted he could succeed without the gods, and spurned Athene's aid, her anger struck him with madness and death (Sophocles, *Ajax* 756-778). Connected with this is that the word εὐδαιμονία, which we translate 'happiness', originally meant 'being favoured by divinity (δαίμων)'. Yet in the written speech Socrates comes perilously close to saying you must and can prosper on your own, by your own efforts: you are to gain *eudaimonia* without the help of god or gods. Divinity's role is an ancillary one only, to protect the just—or at any rate to protect Socrates through the 'divine sign'—from certain unforeseeable worldly consequences of their own justice. If the 'divine sign' is a special gift to Socrates (as is implied at *Republic* 496c), even so the just will not suffer harm for the lack of its protection. Being just, they will always prefer death to doing what is unjust, and will never regard death as a harm that matters. But divinity cannot make people just and virtuous. It can only wait upon humans to be virtuous by their own efforts, and then it is well pleased. The question is, might not our decent-minded juror think this the most frightful hubris? And does not hubris land not only the hubristic individual but also his city in trouble? The city of Athens has recently been through terrible troubles. Are not the jurors menaced, directly or indirectly, as a consequence of having this hubristic philosopher in their midst?

I have argued that Socrates' god demands a radical questioning of the commu-

¹² Burnet's construal of the sentence, my italics. Both the construal and the italics are confirmed by the negative expression of the same idea at 41c-d: 'To a good man nothing bad happens either in life or in death, nor are his affairs uncared for by gods'. This famous declaration of faith (it is introduced as something the worthy jurors ought to hold true) is the closest Socrates comes in the *Apology* to the idea of divine providence. But you must acquire virtue first.

nity's values and its religion. I want now to move the discussion to a more theoretical level, to gain a better understanding of the confrontation between traditional Athenian religion and the singleminded divinity of Socratic religion. The text that seems designed to help us reach this understanding—although we do not know whether it came out after, in conjunction with, or before the *Apology*—is Plato's *Euthyphro*, to which ancient editors gave the subtitle 'On piety: a testing dialogue'.

Euthyphro, whose ideas about piety Socrates will put to the test, is prosecuting his own father. At their farm on the distant island of Naxos a hired labourer killed one of the house slaves in a drunken brawl. Euthyphro's father tied the man up, threw him into a ditch, and sent a messenger to Athens to ask the religious authorities what he ought to do. By the time the messenger returned, the labourer was dead from hunger and cold. One question a reader of this dialogue is invited to think about is this: Does Euthyphro act piously in bringing a charge of homicide against his own father on behalf of the labourer?

The magistrate before whom Euthyphro has come to lay his charge is about to give a preliminary hearing to the charge against Socrates, who is accused, so he tells Euthyphro, of corrupting the young by making new gods and not believing in the old ones. So another question a reader of this dialogue is invited to think about is the question, Is Socrates guilty of impiety?

Clearly, both questions should be thought about together. They invite a contrast between the standards of the old religion, strongly—even fanatically—supported by Euthyphro, and those of Socratic religion. It would be difficult to imagine a more dramatic context for the theme-question of the dialogue: 'What are piety and impiety both in relation to murder and in relation to other things?' (5c-d).

Euthyphro's first properly formulated answer to the question 'What is piety?' is: Piety is what is pleasing to the gods (6e). Now if by 'definition' you mean what many modern philosophers mean by it, an analysis of the meaning of a word in ordinary discourse, then Euthyphro's definition is as good a definition as you will find in the Platonic corpus. Greek religion was much occupied with propitiating and pleasing gods. The snag was, how can humans know what gods want? Worse, different divinities often want different and incompatible things, as when Euripides' Hippolytus was caught in the cross fire between the chaste goddess Artemis and Aphrodite, goddess of sexual love. The conflict of religious obligations may be tragically unresolvable.

More troubling still is the prospect of conflict between different aspects of the same divinity. At a difficult moment on the way back from his expedition, Xenophon sacrifices to Zeus Basileus (Zeus the King) and dutifully does what the entrails prescribe (*Anabasis* vii 6.44). Not long afterwards, and still struggling, he learns from a seer that his difficulties are due to Zeus Meilichios (Zeus the Merciful): he has not sacrificed to *him* (vii 7.4).¹³

¹³ For more on the conflictedness of Greek divinity, see Padel 1995, ch. 20.

In the *Euthyphro* it is enough for Socrates to fasten on the first type of conflict. Not on the lack of singlemindedness in an individual god but on the fact that the gods quarrel and disagree—at least according to the stories that Euthyphro believes. Socrates has already said he is reluctant to accept the religious narratives of his community (6a-b—a very significant admission for the question before us). But, given Euthyphro's beliefs, Socrates is entitled to argue:

It would not be surprising if, in punishing your father as you are doing, your action is pleasing to Zeus [who tied up his father, Cronus, for eating his own children] but hateful to Cronus and Uranus [Zeus' grandfather, whom Cronus castrated], pleasing to Hephaestus but hateful to Hera, and similarly with respect to any other gods who are at variance with one another over your action. (8b)

In short, the same things may be both pious (because pleasing to some gods) and impious (because displeasing to others).

I need not remind you that these very stories of the gods and goddesses doing violence to one another are the paradigm examples of what will be banned by the censors of the ideal city of the *Republic* (377c-378d), who will not even permit an allegorical interpretation of these central narratives of Greek religion. Plato knew very well that he was proposing an ideological reconstruction of the entire Greek tradition. What Euthyphro, as a fanatical spokesman for the old ideology, should have replied when faced with Socrates' conclusion that the same thing may be both pious and impious is: 'Yes, that's life. Remember the story of Hippolytus.' Instead, Plato asserts his authorial control and makes Euthyphro allow Socrates to change the definition of piety so that it now reads: 'What is pious is what is pleasing to *all* the gods' (9e).

This is fatal. Why have many gods if they think and act as one? Were this revised definition of piety to gain acceptance at Athens, it would destroy the community's religion and its sense of its own identity.

Worse follows. Socrates asks: Are the gods pleased by what is pious because it is pious, or is it pious because it pleases the gods? This is the intellectual ancestor of the question that exercised the theologians of later, monotheistic times: Does God command what is good because it is good, or is it good because God commands it? A knotty, abstract, but enormously influential piece of reasoning forces Euthyphro to endorse the first alternative and reject the second. He accepts that the gods are pleased by what is pious because it is pious, not the other way round. This is another blow to traditional polytheism. Piety becomes a moral quality prior to and independent of divine pleasure or displeasure. The gods not only think and act as one. They all singlemindedly love virtue and hate vice. If you want to know how to please the gods, moral philosophy will tell you more than the sorts of divination on which Xenophon had to rely.

Such gods would never have brought about the Trojan war, which goes back, you remember, to the judgement of Paris and Aphrodite's promise that, if he gave the prize for beauty to her rather than to Hera or Athene, she would get him

the love of Menelaus' wife Helen. And where would we be now without the Trojan war? I am tempted to say that, with gods as singlemindedly moral as Socrates', Greek culture would have been impossible and, in consequence, Western civilization would not be what it is today.

A less flamboyant way of putting the same point is to quote Gregory Vlastos:

What would be left of her [Hera] and of the other Olympians if they were required to observe the stringent norms of Socratic virtue which require every moral agent, human or divine, to act only to cause good to others, never evil, regardless of provocation? Required to meet these austere standards, the city's gods would have become unrecognizable. Their ethical transformation would be tantamount to the destruction of the old gods, the creation of new ones—which is precisely what Socrates takes to be the sum and substance of the accusation at his trial. (Vlastos 1991, 166)

Back, then, to the trial. The question before us as 'juror-readers' of the *Apology* is not whether Socrates has a better religion than the Athenians, but whether he believes in the gods the city believes in. The discussion in the *Euthyphro* may—or again it may not—leave you siding morally and/or intellectually with Socrates, but it was Socrates himself at the beginning of the *Apology* who said that a good jury member should consider nothing but the justice of the case presented. And the case for the prosecution is that Socrates does wrong to the city by rejecting its religion, not believing in the gods the city believes in and corrupting the young by leading them not to believe in them either. So I ask you again, Is he guilty or not guilty as charged?

[The vote at Geneva now was 26 against Socrates, a few in his favour and a number of abstentions. Previous versions of this speech have invariably secured a similar reversal of opinion. A good illustration for Plato's strictures on the power of rhetoric.]

After the verdict, the penalty. In ancient Athens this was decided by the jury too, and they accepted the death sentence the prosecution had demanded from the start. Although I have argued that Socrates was guilty as charged, I certainly would not ask anyone to support the further decision to impose the death penalty. What I want to do, by way of concluding, is to connect the case of Socrates with a recent, continuing tragedy of our own society.

Socrates was put to death by and on behalf of a traditional religion that was both polytheistic and (let us say) not particularly focussed on what we would call morality. When in book 10 of Plato's *Laws* an ideal society is recommended where the gods are conceived in terms Socrates would approve, as 'good and honouring justice more than humans do' (887b), Plato is quite happy to impose the death penalty on those who refuse to adhere to the creed of his new religion if they cannot be cured of their unbelief (909a). In this sense, the new religion ushered in by Socrates and Plato proved even less tolerant than the old. We know

that Christianity turned out no better. A few years ago an English newspaper (the *Independent*) published a letter in which the Pope of the time of Queen Elizabeth I advised two Catholic English noblemen that, were they to assassinate the Queen, Head of the Church of England, it would increase, rather than decrease, their prospects of everlasting bliss in Heaven.

That, of course, was a conflict between two brands of Christianity. But in the fictional world of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* we meet again a confrontation between a traditional polytheistic religion and a new highly moralistic monotheism. In all that has been written about the Rushdie affair, I have not seen it sufficiently emphasized that the now notorious scenes of blasphemy in Gibreel's dream are not a mindless insult to the Prophet and his wives, but an act of symbolic, passive resistance by the adherents of the traditional polytheistic religion, after this has been prohibited by the Prophet, the old gods' statues thrown down, and their temples closed. 'There were more ways than one of refusing to Submit' (p. 381). The death sentence which in the novel's dream is actually carried out on Baal, the poet at the centre of the resistance, is a fictional anticipation of the sentence pronounced upon Rushdie in the real world of our day—the world in which it was appropriate to remind *Independent* readers of religious conflict in their own European past.

Both Socrates and Rushdie's polytheists speak, think, and act in ways that the opposing religion is bound to consider impious. But the converse is also true. One group's piety is another's impiety. The *Euthyphro* lays the groundwork for Plato's own denunciation in the *Republic* of the impiety of traditional Greek religion, from which in turn he derives his notorious proposals to censor literature out of existence. Euthyphro himself may be a fanatical enthusiast, but what he is an enthusiast for is the traditional religion. (In the *Cratylus* his 'expertise' enables him to understand the meaning and significance of the names of lots and lots of gods.) Numenius of Apamea (second century AD), the first pagan philosopher we know of to take an interest in the Bible, imagined that Plato chose so 'boastful and dull-witted' a character in order to be able to criticize 'the theology of the Athenians' without incurring the same fate as Socrates (frag. 23 Des Places). A fanciful idea, perhaps, but better than denying all connection between Euthyphro's views and the religious basis for accusing Socrates of impiety.¹⁴

It is perhaps less obvious that the *Apology* is on the same side as the *Euthyphro* and *Republic*. We are so accustomed to reading it as the testimony of one who dies for the freedom of inquiry and the freedom to proclaim in the marketplace the results of inquiry, no matter how upsetting to received opinion. Indeed, as an unreconstructed liberal I like to think of the historical Socrates as doing just that, dying for the cause of free thought and free speech. But here I am speaking of the Socrates of Plato's *Apology*. And there is no doubt that the relation between the author of the *Apology of Socrates* and the author of *Euthyphro*, *Republic*, and *Laws* x, is the relation of identity.

¹⁴ For an extreme case of this denial, see Burnet 1924, 5-7.

This brings me to the final suggestion I want to leave you with. I offer it as no more than a possibility to think about, a rather sobering hypothesis concerning the verdict Plato himself had in view when he wrote the *Apology*. The verdict was this: —

Yes, Socrates was guilty as charged of not believing in the traditional gods and introducing new divinities. But what is shown by the fact that so good a man as Socrates was guilty of impiety under Athenian law? The impiety of Athenian religion. What the Athenians, from within that religion, inevitably saw as his wronging the city was the true god's gift to them of a mission to improve their souls, to educate them into a better religion. They judged as they did, and could do no other, out of ignorance. For they had the wrong religion, and he was the first martyr for the true religion. So what we should do, as readers of Plato's brilliant and moving defence, is join with him in promoting the new religion. *In cauda venenum*. If we can get political power, we will make this new religion compulsory for all—especially the poets.

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