

Believing in the republic



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Plato's Republic is rife with evidence of, and commentary on, the nature of the Greek religion. Some of the treatment is overt, as in the censorship of canonical works of poets and dramatists or in the references to the powers and functions of the gods. In other cases, one can read about religion between the lines, not in what Plato says, but in how and why he says it, and in the evidence he feels it necessary to give. Among the most interesting facets of Greek religion is the nature of the source material. There are no holy texts, no commandments from Zeus. The gods do speak to the people through oracles, but their prophecies are notoriously vague and difficult to interpret. The only available religious texts are the works of the poets and playwrights. These are forms which do not pretend to absolute historical accuracy, since their writers readily incorporate the fictional and hyperbolic; Plato calls them "allegorical" (378d). The entanglement of literature and theology gives Greek religion qualities which modern religions wholly lack. The texts on which the religion is based are known creations of human hands and minds. Every history of the gods' involvement in the human sphere and every tale about their interactions with one another is therefore accessible to the religion's believers as a product of their own society, open to both religious and secular (that is to say, aesthetic) interpretation. The concept of the sacred text, and the presence within a religious text of a rigid code of laws, objectifies a belief system in a way that fiction simply cannot. Although poets are occasionally considered to be the offspring of the Muses, or subject to other divine influence, they are nonetheless ordinary human beings in other respects. They are, for example, much more ordinary than the prophets and scribes who committed the Bible to paper, especially if one accepts the idea that biblical scribes were taking direct dictation from the

mouth of God. Greek religion, then, is much more a human project; the collective output of a society to meet some inherent need. From this perspective, one can better understand Plato's seemingly reckless and insensitive censorship of the religious content of poems and plays. That the texts he works on possess no "sacred" cachet is essential. By altering them, he changes not the nature of the gods themselves, but rather the nature of humanity's representation of them. The Greek gods preserve some sort of autonomy from diverse and conflicting theologies, a power perhaps rooted in the strength of an entire society's belief. Plato, as a philosopher, is no less qualified to report on the gods' actions and natures than a poet, even if he does so from a radically different perspective. In the context of *The Republic*, his perspective is based upon the creation of a hypothetical polis. The theoretical nature of this enterprise allows Plato even greater freedom from traditional theology. The extent of this freedom can readily be seen in Plato's treatment of other familiar cultural institutions. For instance, he turns the family upside-down, at least within the guardian class. He undermines life-long partnership and, by giving the guardians a communal barracks rather than private homes, eliminates the role of the family as an economic unit. Without households to manage, women have fewer demands on their time and are thus able to participate in guardianship equally with the men, another radical change. Through his assertion of the three kinds of humans (gold, silver and bronze), which is incidentally given a religious basis, Plato also isolates children from their biological family situation, rearranging them according to their merit. He simply decimates the family from all angles, reorganizing it, showing no more reserve than he showed in his treatment of religion. We have established that the conditions are such that Plato feels

comfortable changing the nature of the gods, but his motivations for doing so are also of interest. His first assertion is that the gods must be wholly good. This seems to be an unusual assertion for the times; Plato finds a plethora of contradictions to this hypothesis in epic poetry and in drama. It is puzzling that such an apparently uncommon idea is given so very little logical support. The establishing exchange is as follows: "Whether in epic, lyric, or tragedy, a god must always be represented as he is. Indeed, he must. Now, a god is really good, isn't he, and must be described as such? What else?" (379b) The brevity of this argument and its total dearth of logical support beg some sort of explanation. One could potentially be found in Plato's firmly held notion of the forms, but that will be left for later. There is perhaps another explanation, one of sheer necessity within the context of the hypothetical polis. Education, which in many ways is the cornerstone of the polis, as it is assigned responsibility for the accomplishments and virtues (or lack thereof) of all of the residents, is considered by Plato to be one-half physical training and the other half music and poetry. Earlier we established theology's basis in music and poetry, but the inversion of the argument can also be made: music and poetry concern themselves primarily with theology. Gods play both major and minor roles in various texts, but there are few, if any, in which they do not receive mention at all. Plato is then caught in a quandary: if his citizens are to be virtuous, they must be educated, but they must be educated with extant texts, and the content of these cannot always be depended upon to foster virtue. This is why he resorts to censorship; there is no other readily apparent option. Goodness alone is not enough to establish the gods as paragons of virtue. They must also be immutable. Given the specificity of this necessary quality* so much more concrete than "

goodness”* and a basic familiarity with the workings of Plato’s general paradigm, it is much easier to explain this demand than the first. Plato associates the mutable with the tangible world of the senses, and immutability with the world of the forms. If one can align humankind with the tangible earth, then the gods must occupy the heaven of the forms. Indeed, much later in the text, Plato establishes the gods’ role as creators of the forms. “ The god . . . didn’t make more than one bed in nature, but only one, the very one that is the being of a bed” (597d). In this way, he begins to integrate religion with his larger world-view. Plato never stops to question the workability or efficacy of his newly prescribed notions of god. The question of belief never overtly enters into the dialogue. This is a challenging point: he alters a religion’s fundamental texts without questioning the impact of this action on the religion as a whole. From a contemporary standpoint, the absence of this analysis is puzzling. The existence of the Apocrypha, and the question of the legitimacy of these books, has long been a point of contention within the Christian world. In one light, Plato’s changes to the Greek religion are even more extreme than those that would be effected by the addition of the Apocrypha to the traditional canon: he actually discards previously held truths, rather than simply accepting new ones. One wonders about the nature of Plato’s faith, since while his actions place him in a critical, detached position* more comfortable for the non-believer* it is by no means certain that Plato is not personally attached to and involved with traditional Greek religious beliefs. The evidence for this belief can be found scattered throughout The Republic. Most impressively, Plato gives the gods something of a power of sanction over the polis he has created. He ascribes at least responsibility for the implementation of his laws to the gods when he

says that men can be trusted to create appropriate legislation for themselves “ provided that a god grants that the laws we have already described are preserved” (425e). This admission resurfaces later in the text, when Plato says that a true reign of philosopher kings could come only from “ some chance event” or else from a god directly interceding to inspire “ a true erotic love for true philosophy” in the present rulers (499c). Even Plato’s purely theoretical polis is subject to the rulings and desires of the gods, and this testifies to his own faith. Periodically through the text, Plato makes reference to very traditional actions of the gods. Occasionally, he gives them great power so as to vastly change a situation in service of one of his logical arguments. For instance, he comically gives them the ability to pick up a household from the city and deposit it in the countryside, so as to prove its vulnerability there. On the other hand, he sometimes mentions traditional roles more seriously. Gods were said to originate their own rituals and traditions, and Plato says that to determine a proper course of action he’ll “ inquire from the god what kind of distinguished funeral we should give to daimonic and godlike people, and we’ll follow his instructions” (469a). It could perhaps be argued that these are just Greek figures of speech, but they nonetheless prove the cultural hegemony of Greek faith. If Plato is a believer, as he appears to be and as he appears to think the citizens of his republic to be, how can he remain so in this critical environment, so hostile to pure faith? The answer arises from his identification* even conflation* of the gods with the world of the forms. Plato’s faith in the utter perfection of the immaterial forms is so deep that it serves to fuel his faith in the gods, also perfect and immaterial in their perfection. This conclusion is not yet satisfactory, however. The problem remains that Plato, critic and believer,

was willing to distort the closest thing to sacred texts that the Greek religion had. Poems and plays, if not absolute truth, constituted the core of source material from which some version of absolute truth* his own ideas about the perfection of gods* arose. Where does Plato get the critical distance and initiative it takes to disrupt the position of such texts? His answer is in allegory, a relationship much like the relationship he imagines between a bed and the form of a bed. Or else, when a thing fails to imitate what it intends to or “ when a story gives a bad image of what the gods and heroes are like,” it is essentially what “ a painter does whose picture is not at all like the things he intended to paint” (377e). In other words, although true knowledge about the gods resides directly in the canon, many of the stories err in their communication of this truth. In this way, Plato can hold at once knowledge of the perfection of divine inspiration and clear nature of human error, and from the knowledge his faith is secured.