

RITES AND RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF SOCRATES ACCORDING
TO XENOPHON (*APOLOGY OF SOCRATES* 11 AND
MEMORABILIA 1.1.2)

Two excerpts from Xenophon, in which he states that Socrates avidly practised religious ceremonies promoted by Athens, are subject to two different interpretations by modern historians. For some, they are the proof that the Athenian city was only concerned with the rituals of its fellow citizens, and in no way with their beliefs. In contrast with this view, Hendrick Versnel feels that, by writing that Socrates performed ceremonies, Xenophon thinks that he proves that his master really did believe in the gods. Both of these interpretations are incorrect, as a careful new consideration of these passages can demonstrate.

In his *Apology of Socrates* Xenophon begins with the first speech of Socrates before his judges thus: 'One thing that I marvel at in Meletus, gentlemen, is what may be the basis of his assertion that I do not believe in the gods worshipped by the *polis* (τοῦτο μὲν πρῶτον θαυμάζω Μελήτου, ὅτω ποτὲ γνοῦς λέγει ὡς ἐγὼ οὐς ἡ πόλις νομίζει θεοὺς οὐ νομίζω), for all who have happened to be near at the time, as well as Meletus himself, if he so desired, have seen me sacrificing (θύοντα) at the communal festivals and on the altars (ἐν ταῖς κοιναῖς ἐορταῖς καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν δημοσίων βωμῶν).'¹ Xenophon recounts a very similar testimony to this in his *Memorabilia*: 'First then, that he rejected the gods acknowledged by the *polis* (οὐκ ἐνόμιζεν οὐς ἡ πόλις νομίζει θεοὺς), what evidence did they produce of that (ποιῶ ποτ' ἐχρήσαντο τεκμηρίω)? He offered sacrifices constantly, and made no secret of it, now in his home, now at the altars of the *polis* temples (τῶν κοινῶν τῆς πόλεως βωμῶν), and he made use of divination with as little secrecy.'²

Certain historians, such as Robert Garland, Pierre Brulé or Manuela Giordano-Zecharya, consider these excerpts as proof that only ritual had a place in the religious norms of the Greeks.³ The religious norm would be only a ritual norm, its scope limited by the border which separates the ritual domain from the domain of belief, totally excluding the latter, or relegating it to second place.⁴ Robert Garland thereby comments on these extracts: 'Xenophon therefore counters what he evidently interprets as a charge of religious negligence with a bold assertion to the contrary, by depicting Sokrates as a man of exemplary piety and the victim of malicious and unfounded slander.'⁵ Pierre Brulé adopts a similar interpretation while speaking about a 'confusion' in the distinction of rituals and beliefs: 'So, in having sacrificed in full view of everyone, or by having simply taken part (being present, therefore *seeing*) in the sacrifice with the others, especially when these rituals are done under a political framework, this sole presence

¹ Xen. *Ap.* 11, trans. O.J. Todd (London, 1923).

² Xen. *Mem.* 1.1.2, trans. E.C. Marchant (London, 1923).

³ See also J. Burnet, *Plato's Euthyphron, Apology of Socrates and Crito* (Oxford, 1924), 184 and S.C. Todd, *The Shape of Athenian Law* (Oxford, 1993), 311 n. 25.

⁴ In general, rites have taken a bigger place in the works of the modern historians than beliefs, which are relegated to a second place, because Greek religion is seen as ritualistic. For a historiographical review about the questions of rites and beliefs in Greek religion, see T. Harrison, 'Belief vs practice', in E. Eidinow and J. Kindt (edd.), *The Oxford Handbook of Ancient Greek Religion* (Oxford, 2015), 21–8.

⁵ R. Garland, *Introducing New Gods. The Politics of Athenian Religion* (London, 1992), 142.

proves the acknowledgement of the city's gods and was therefore sufficient for the accused to see himself absolved of an accusation of unrighteousness.⁶ Other scholars take an identical point of view to that of Robert Garland. For example, for Manuela Giordano-Zecharya, 'from these passages, we can confirm that the accusation related to *nomizein* concerned the omission of Athenian customary worship'. Socrates would have been accused of 'irregularity in worship'.⁷ It is true that we can read a link between the reality of *voμίζεiv θεούς* and Socrates' ceremonial actions in these extracts. For those historians the sole existence of the ritual could therefore be sufficient proof of his acknowledgement of the city's gods. Thus, by arguing that it was well known that Socrates practised Greek religion in the right way, Xenophon disclosed to historians his total lack of interest, as well as that of his Athenian contemporaries including Socrates' accusers, in their religious belief: only ritual counts, therefore, to defend Socrates, one must mention only ritual.

Hendrick Versnel, on the other hand, has adopted an entirely opposite interpretation of these excerpts: he supposes that Xenophon wanted to signify that, 'if a person prays or brings sacrifices, this proves that he *voμίζεiv θεούς* in the sense of believing in the existence of gods'.⁸

An alternative reading of Xenophon's almost identical extracts seems preferable. First, it should be emphasized that, as noted by Jean Rudhart, as far as we are aware, we do not have any law compelling a person to fulfil rituals,⁹ while we do know of at least one law (even if its authenticity is heavily debated) regarding non-belief in the gods, namely the decree of Diopetithes of 433/432.¹⁰ More importantly, Pierre Brulé and Robert Garland cite these statements before commenting on them, and both crop them and take them out of context whilst omitting an essential piece of information. Manuela Giordano-Zecharya and Hendrick Versnel do not make this mistake but they do not manage to grasp the huge importance of the beginning of these two extracts towards their understanding.

⁶ P. Brulé, 'La religion, histoire et structure', in P. Brulé and R. Descat (edd.), *Le Monde grec aux temps classiques. Tome 2, Le IV^e siècle* (Paris, 2004), 413–79, at 432. He reiterates this reinterpretation in P. Brulé, 'Contribution des *Nuées* au problème de l'incroyance au V^e siècle', in P. Brulé (ed.), *La Norme en matière religieuse en Grèce ancienne* (Liège, 2009), 49–67, at 65. F.S. Naiden, 'Contagious *ἀσέβεια*', *CQ* 66 (2016), 59–74, at 60 and 69 expresses the same idea: '[Xenophon] reports that Socrates was accused of "not accepting the gods", and was innocent because he worshipped them.' His point of view seemed more finely shaded a few years earlier in F.S. Naiden, 'Sanctions in sacred laws', in E.M. Harris, G. Thür (edd.), *Symposion 2007. Papers on Greek and Hellenistic Legal History* (Vienna, 2008), 125–38, at 136: 'this defense was irrelevant to the charges of atheism and corruption of the youth'.

⁷ M. Giordano-Zecharya, 'As Socrates shows, the Athenians did not believe in gods', *Numen* 52 (2005), 325–55, at 338. For an identical point of view, see G. Vlastos, *Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Cambridge, 1991), 290–1 and J. Ober, 'Socrates and democratic Athens', in D.R. Morrison (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Socrates* (Cambridge, 2011), 138–78, at 142.

⁸ H.S. Versnel, *Coping With the Gods. Wayward Readings in Greek Theology* (Leiden, 2011), 557.

⁹ J. Rudhart, 'La définition du délit d'impieété d'après la législation attique', *MH* 17 (1960), 87–105, at 94.

¹⁰ Cf. Plut. *Per.* 32.2. For an argument aimed at rejecting the historicity of the decree, cf. K.J. Dover, 'The freedom of the intellectual in Greek society', *Talanta* 7 (1976), 24–54, at 39–40; I.F. Stone, *The Trial of Socrates* (London, 1988), 233; R.W. Wallace, 'Private lives and public enemies: freedom of thought in classical Athens', in A.L. Boegehold and A.C. Scafuro (edd.), *Athenian Identity and Civic Ideology* (Baltimore, 1994), 127–55, at 137–8; and J. Filonik, 'Athenian impiety trials: a reappraisal', *Dikē* 16 (2013), 11–96, at 32–3. For an opposing point of view, see D. Lenfant, 'Protagoras et son procès d'impieété: peut-on soutenir une thèse et son contraire?', *Ktēma* 27 (2002), 135–53, at 149–53; P. Curd, *Anaxagoras of Clazomenae, Fragments and Testimonia* (Toronto, 2007), 136; and A. Rubel, *Fear and Loathing in Ancient Athens. Religion and Politics during the Peloponnesian War* (Durham, 2014²), 36.

In his *Memorabilia*, before saying that Socrates practised Greek religious rituals in full view of everyone, Xenophon asks himself: ‘what evidence did they produce of that’ (ποῖω ποτ’ ἐχρήσαντο τεκμηρίῳ) to say that Socrates ‘did not recognize the gods of the city’ (οὐκ ἐνόμιζεν οὐς ἡ πόλις νομίζει θεοὺς)? In the *Apology*, before declaring that he performs Greek rituals, Socrates says: ‘One thing that I marvel at in Meletus, gentlemen, is what may be the basis of his assertion that I do not believe in the gods worshipped by the *polis*’ (τοῦτο μὲν πρῶτον θαυμάζω Μελήτου, ὅτῳ ποτὲ γνοὺς λέγει ὡς ἐγὼ οὐς ἡ πόλις νομίζει θεοὺς οὐ νομίζω). These two sections of text form a key factor in Xenophon’s argument: he has doubts about the proof, the τεκμήριον, which allowed us to suspect Socrates of not believing in the existence of the city’s gods. Thus, by declaring that Socrates performed the Athenian religious ceremonies, Xenophon does not necessarily show a lack of interest in Socrates’ beliefs: he simply demonstrates that the accusers lack the evidence to allege that Socrates did not believe in Athens’ honoured gods. On the other hand, nothing says that, by emphasizing Socrates’ active practice of religious rituals, Xenophon proves Socrates’ innocence either, despite what Hendrick Versnel maintains. Xenophon simply says that the absence of Socrates’ beliefs is impossible to prove.

In other words, nowhere does Xenophon confirm that ritual practice is the absolute proof of the acknowledgement of the gods. He merely states that given Socrates’ active and visible performance of Athenian religious ceremonies, there can be no evidence of what we have accused him of. The absence of rituals could be evidence of non-recognition of the city’s gods.¹¹ In the absence of the lack of rituals, there is no proof. Thus, according to Xenophon, it is difficult to prove that somebody so obviously devout does not believe in the gods, because the actions that he carries out are related in a sense to beliefs, including the existence of the city’s gods. Therefore, these excerpts prove neither that only ritual had a place in Greek religious norms nor that Socrates was prosecuted merely for his acts, or rather for his lack of acts of worship.

École Normale Supérieure de Lyon

ALEXANDRE JAKUBIEC
alexandre.jakubiec@ens-lyon.fr
 doi:10.1017/S0009838817000271

EURIPIDES, *CYCLOPS* 375–6

ΟΔ. ὦ Ζεῦ, τί λέξω, δεινὸν ἰδὼν ἄντρων ἔσω 375
 κοῦ πιστά, μύθοις εἰκότ’ οὐδ’ ἔργοις βροτῶν;

OD. O Zeus, what am I to say, when I’ve witnessed such terrible things inside the cave—
 things that are incredible, like stories but not like deeds of mortals?¹

¹¹ Cf. J. Mikalson, *Popular Religion in Greek Philosophy* (Oxford, 2010), 168: ‘Not to sacrifice to [the gods] is an act of “lack of respect”, which indicates that one does not believe they exist.’

¹ The text is that of the lone manuscript and, punctuation aside, of all recent editions; the translation is that of Patrick O’Sullivan, in P. O’Sullivan and C. Collard (edd.), *Euripides Cyclops and Major Fragments of Greek Satyric Drama* (Oxford, 2013). I invite my readers to join me in thanking the

Reproduced with permission of
copyright owner. Further
reproduction prohibited without
permission.