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As Socrates Shows, the Athenians Did Not Believe in Gods

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Source: *Numen*, 2005, Vol. 52, No. 3 (2005), pp. 325-355

Published by: Brill

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/27643170>

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AS SOCRATES SHOWS,  
THE ATHENIANS DID NOT BELIEVE IN GODS

MANUELA GIORDANO-ZECHARYA

*Summary*

This paper reopens the discussion of key terms of the Socratic indictment, such as “worship” or “belief,” from the point of view of Athenian religiosity. It addresses the content of the accusation itself: the main contention is that the accusations of “atheism” and “disbelief” are indeed opaque when understood against the background of the sources and in the context of Greek religiosity. The investigation includes a detailed inquiry into the categories of *faith* and *belief* and into the cultural reasons underlying the choice of these terms in Socratic scholarship.\*

Athenian religion was a matter of practice, not of belief, and the conception of ‘orthodoxy’ . . . did not exist.<sup>1</sup>

The absence of orthodoxy or fixed doctrines in Greek religion has been recognized and stated many a time since the “ritual turn” initiated at the end of the nineteenth century by W. Robertson Smith.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, it has been argued that the Greeks must have

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\* I wish to thank Camilla Bottaro, Giovanni Cerri, Cristiano Grottanelli, Nicholas D. Smith, Guy Stroumsa and Bar Zecharya for their valuable comments and suggestions.

<sup>1</sup> Burnet 1924:5. See Sourvinou-Inwood 2003:12, 20, for the latest formulation of this same view.

<sup>2</sup> Robertson Smith 1889; Bremmer 1998; Bremmer’s valuable reflection can be usefully integrated with some of the contributions on the subject under discussion here. Among the recent publications see most notably Bell 1992; for ancient Greece see Calame 1991, especially 196–203 and Calame 1997, especially 111–16. On Greek religion see Bruit Zaidman and Schmitt Pantel 1992; Bremmer 1994.

shared “fundamental beliefs” that inspired their ritual action and that we can deduce from their main practices, such as sacrifice, libation, etc.: “one can infer from the religious institutions of the polis certain beliefs about the gods which at a minimum the worshipper must *necessarily* have held, if he were to believe that the ritual and accompanying prayers, to say nothing of his ethical conduct, had any *religious* significance”.<sup>3</sup> The inference of belief from the mere presence of ritual relies ultimately on the scholar’s axiom that “ritual is religious and religion is belief.”

In the last twenty years or so, abundant evidence from anthropological fieldwork has shaken this long-held assumption by showing the intrinsic ambiguity and instability of opinions and symbols in connection to ritual action.<sup>4</sup> In many cases ritual forms are fostered for their implicit symbolic force in promoting social solidarity, and because they *avoid* focusing on statements of belief.<sup>5</sup> As

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A “ritual interpretation” does not deny, however, that the Greeks shared a common religious discourse, open to ideological mobilization for various purposes.

<sup>3</sup> Yunis 1988:39, the italics are original. The “fundamental religious beliefs” of the Athenians would be (1) the existence of the gods, (2) their interest in human affairs, and (3) the relationship based on reciprocity with the gods, 42–58. Some convergence with this position is to be found in Bremmer 1998:24, which raises the question: “Is the opposition ‘ritual’ vs. ‘belief’ not too absolute? Are rites not also a reflection of beliefs?”

<sup>4</sup> Goody 1977. For a discussion of recent bibliography on this point, see Bell 1992:182–87; see also Bourque 2000, who speaks of rituals as “sites of contested meanings”, going well beyond the integrative function of ritual. The original formulation, however intuitive, of this idea is to be found in Robertson Smith 1889:15, where it is argued that, “In ancient Greece, for example, certain things were done at a temple, and people were agreed that it would be impious not to do them. But if you had asked why they were done, you would probably have had several mutually contradictory explanations from different persons, and no one would have thought it a matter of the least religious importance which of these you chose to adopt.”

<sup>5</sup> As Bell 1992:184 states, “Symbols and symbolic action not only fail to communicate clear and shared understandings, but the obvious ambiguity or over-determination of much religious symbolism may even be integral to its efficacy.”

many scholars have pointed out, taking part in a ritual does not necessarily imply belief in it but it certainly raises questions about participation, correctness and empowerment processes.<sup>6</sup>

### *The Indictment Against Socrates*

The indictment against Socrates illustrates clearly the aforementioned conflict of interpretations about ritual and belief in Athenian religion.

The accusation that brought the philosopher to trial reads, in my interpretation, as follows: “Socrates offends the gods that the polis worships by not worshipping them, and by introducing other, new gods.”<sup>7</sup>

Many recent interpretations of Socrates’ indictment describe it as being a charge of atheism, of not believing in the gods, of unorthodoxy, or of not recognizing the gods.<sup>8</sup> In this sense Socrates has

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<sup>6</sup> Bell 1992; see also Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994, who speak of the “unintentional intentionality of ritual action.” Bell states very convincingly that there is little use in understanding ritual as an instrument of a pre-existing doctrine or ideological purpose: “ritual practices” she argues, “are themselves the very production and negotiation of power relations”, a way of manipulating cultural schemes and not simply reproducing them. Cf. Bell 1992:196.

<sup>7</sup> *Adikei Sokrates tous theous men he polis nomizei ou nomizon, hetera de kaina daimonia eisegoumenos*, Favorinus *ap. Diog. Laert.* 2.40. The letter of the text is fairly consistent in the other sources, Xenoph. *Mem.* 1.1,1; *Apol.* 10; Plat. *Apol.* 24c; Philodem. *de Piet.* 1696–7 Obbink.

<sup>8</sup> The question is even more interesting as it is not uncommon to find those same scholars who show awareness of the distinctive ritual character of Greek and Athenian religion, speaking of atheism, unorthodoxy or belief in the gods when discussing the trial of Socrates. For example Finley 1968:64 states that Greek religion “had little of what we should call dogma about it, but was largely a matter of ritual and myth,” and goes on to report that “Socrates was accused of a specific form of impiety; namely, that he disbelieved in the city’s gods” (65). As for atheism, it is often interpreted as kainotheism, but, as I will argue later, there are important reasons to avoid this term.

been viewed as a *unicum* in Athenian history for having been condemned for his “words” and not for his actions.<sup>9</sup> A full critical assessment of the relevant literature would exceed by far the limits of this paper, and in fact, the use of these terms is pervasive. Recently, for example, R.A. Bauman speaks of charges of “disbelief and new beliefs,” and “alleged atheism”; D. Cohen states that “what is at stake is belief in the gods, not rituals, not actions, but conviction, opinion, and expression”; G. Vlastos remarks that “the first two of the three charges . . . are clearly a matter of belief; the first one entirely so”; M.H. Hansen says that Socrates was accused of “not believing in the traditional Gods”; R. Parker remarks that “no argument, however, can remove the charge of atheism from the formal indictment against Socrates”; M.F. Burnyeat paraphrases the indictment as “not believing in the gods which the city believes in”; S. Price speaks of “scandalous beliefs concerning the gods.”<sup>10</sup>

At this point we can see two opposing trends: while the study of ancient Greece, along with anthropology and other humanities, is moving away from a focus on “belief” and towards questions of ritual, power relations and symbolic ambiguity, a significant portion of the studies of the trial of Socrates continue to stress the importance of “belief,” “unbelief,” and “atheism.” The subject of Socrates, then, or the incongruity of faith in a culture of ritual, can be seen as a symptom of divergent trends in this milieu of ancient Greek scholarship that I will endeavour to account for.

In brief, the reading of the indictment has undergone three main phases. Most of the discussion revolves around the expression *nomizein tous theous*, whose variant translations “believing in the gods” and “worshipping the gods as customary,” reveal a clash of models of religion: as S. Todd has remarked, “the more obvious the transla-

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<sup>9</sup> Parker 1996:204.

<sup>10</sup> Bauman 1990:107; Cohen 1991:215; Vlastos 1991:293; Hansen 1995:25; Parker 1996:205, 209; Burnyeat 1997:3; Price 1999:82. See also Brickhouse and Smith 1994:179 and 2002:214.

tion the more insidious the tendency to assimilate.”<sup>11</sup> From the end of the nineteenth century until around 1930, the expression was interpreted as “honouring the gods,” focusing on its ritual sense, most probably under the influence of the ritual school.<sup>12</sup> In 1930, the publication of E. Derenne’s book on impiety was a veritable watershed, both for suggesting an interpretation of impiety based on doctrines and beliefs and for arguing against the ritual interpretation of the indictment, which the Belgian scholar translates as “recognizing the existence of the gods according to the custom.”<sup>13</sup> This interpretation has been very successful up to the present. A third phase was initiated in 1969 by W. Fahr’s thorough investigation of the expression *nomizein tous theous*.<sup>14</sup> In some scholars’ opinion Fahr terminates the debate regarding the meaning of the expression, in that he shows that *nomizein tous theous* is an ambiguous expression that can be interpreted either as “believing in” or “worshipping” the gods, and that impiety in the Socratic indictment was understood as holding wrong opinions about the gods. Many scholars have since stressed the political aspect of the accusation and have similarly dismissed the accusation of impiety.<sup>15</sup>

Among those who have taken the religious indictment seriously in the last two decades of scholarship on Socrates’ trial, W.R. Connor stands out as an exception in claiming that the impiety of Socrates is a ritual issue, reviving in a way the old “vulgate” but with a different understanding and awareness of the ritual aspects involved in the trial and in Greek religion in general.<sup>16</sup> For the rest,

<sup>11</sup> Todd 1990:19, in warning against the danger of assimilation in studying legal systems.

<sup>12</sup> See Burnet 1924.

<sup>13</sup> Derenne 1930:218, see also 217–23.

<sup>14</sup> Fahr 1969:160–163. Fahr interprets Socrates’ accusation as a denial of the existence of gods. See also Yunis 1988:63–64; and Parker 1996:201 n. 8: “. . . the verb is poised between a reference to ‘custom, customary [worship]’ . . . and ‘belief’.”

<sup>15</sup> For a recent good critical assessment of this position, see Brickhouse and Smith 2002:207 and n. 47–48.

<sup>16</sup> Connor 1991; it must be noted, however, that he renders the indictment as

since Derenne's book, many scholars have employed the notions of "belief in the gods" and "atheism" in interpreting and paraphrasing the indictment that eventually led to the philosopher's death.<sup>17</sup>

*Nomizein tous theous*: Worshipping or Believing?

Before tackling the semantics of *nomizo*, it is important to take a closer look at the semantic field of *belief*, to see why the terms hitherto discussed are inadequate in describing a tradition such as that of Athens. The polysemy of *to believe* entails the following senses:<sup>18</sup>

- a) Asserting the truth or the existence of something or somebody, in its use "to believe that," "to believe something (a fact, a report)."
- b) Holding as a subjective opinion, to suppose, again in the verbal construction "to believe that."
- c) Having confidence in, trusting, in the expression "to believe in" and "to believe somebody."<sup>19</sup>

The peculiarity lies in the fact that the verb "paradoxically expresses both doubt and certainty"<sup>20</sup> (senses a and b). In non-religious set-

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"recognizing the gods." See also Dover 1968:203, who interprets the indictment as "accept (*or* treat, practice) as normal"; and Brickhouse and Smith 1989:30–34, who translate it as "recognizes"; on these renderings, see below.

<sup>17</sup> Derenne 1930. See *contra* Dover 1976, who seeks to demonstrate the unreliability of the sources concerning the trials against impiety. Dover argues in particular that the trials against Diagoras and Socrates are the only two that can be considered historically consistent, and that the Diopieithes' decree was an invention of Comedy. His opinion, which does not involve a change in terminology, has been widely accepted. See now, *contra*, Lenfant 2002.

<sup>18</sup> I take the verb rather than the noun into consideration, as it is more relevant to Socrates' trial.

<sup>19</sup> Pouillon 1979; his examination is on the French *croire*. For an analysis of English "believe" and "belief," see Needham 1972:40–44.

<sup>20</sup> Pouillon 1979:43.

tings, the context selects one of these senses; in religious settings such a selection is no longer possible. Here, the three meanings short-circuit, as it were, resulting in an ambiguous semantic conflation. In the expression “to believe in God,” unlike in the expression “to believe in a friend,” the selected sense is not only sense c), having trust in God, but also sense a), asserting the existence of God. What is therefore specific to the Christian and modern use of the word is the fact that it subsumes three senses, inextricably. Needham’s case study of Nuer language, and Pouillon’s examples from Dangaleat language, as well as the predicaments experienced by both missionaries and ethnographers in translation, demonstrate that this semantic area has the peculiarity that it is an “inexportable” product of Christian discourse.<sup>21</sup>

In contrast, the verb *nomizo* has three main meanings:

- 1) “To have as a custom,” “acting according to the custom.”
- 2) “Using, practicing or relating to in a customary way” (*nomizein ekklesian, anthropous*).
- 3) “Thinking, holding as customary,” particularly when it governs an infinitive.

The semantic configuration of the verb *nomizo* is centered on the meaning of “custom, tradition,” being a denominative derived from the noun *nomos*.<sup>22</sup> It follows that the Greek *nomizo* and the English “to believe” have entirely different semantic configurations, and

<sup>21</sup> Needham 1972:14–39.

<sup>22</sup> Ostwald 1969:40 remarks, significantly, that “it is . . . immaterial to the Greek way of thinking whether in any given context *nomos* is a rule, a customary practice, or a belief; its characteristic is that it is something generally regarded and accepted as correct for a given group.” See also Ostwald 1986, especially 95–100. He argues that *nomos*, being specified as statutory norm, is used in connection to general norms and rules rather than ritual practices. On *nomos* in religious contexts see Ostwald 1969:40–43. He shows that *nomizo* and *nomimos* refer to worship, most notably prayers and sacrifices, often called *ta nomizomena*, oaths, curses and the like.



that there is overlap only in the sense b) of “to believe” and sense 3) of *nomizo*. However, if “to believe” in the sense of “holding an opinion” is applied in a religious context, as in the sentence “to believe in gods,” this would be entirely misleading; in this case, *nomizo* always refers to customary practices, and means “venerating,” “practicing the cult,” especially by means of prayer and sacrifice.<sup>23</sup> The confusion is the result of the Platonic innovation (see *infra*), and of the superimposition of the verb *nomizein* in the cases where it governs the infinitive, meaning “to think, to have an opinion.”<sup>24</sup>

The alternative rendering “acknowledging the gods” is similarly ambiguous, because exactly what it is *about* the gods that is acknowledged remains unspecified. One does not acknowledge somebody, but some fact *about* somebody; if it were phrased “acknowledging the existence” or “acknowledging the relevance” of the gods, for example, we would be in a better position to judge the appropriateness of the translation. Thus it is clear that “acknowledging the existence of the gods” (essentially a rephrasing of sense a) of “to believe”) has little or no point of contact with the senses of *nomizo*.<sup>25</sup>

The belief-centred interpretation is buttressed sometimes by reference to famous impious people condemned for their words and

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<sup>23</sup> *Ta nomizomena hiera* are the sacrifices prescribed by tradition, *euchai hai nomizomenai* the prayers customarily requested. See the thorough investigation by Fahr 1969, *passim*, examining diachronically the religious occurrences of *nomizo* and the related semantic field, with particular attention to the expression *nomizo tous theous*. Similarly, *nomos* in a religious context describes a whole range of ritual practices, from funerary rituals (Hdt. 2.36.1) to purification (1.35.1) to temple regulations and oaths (*IG* 12.15.30–31). See Xenoph. *Mem.* 4.6.1: “Is it not true that he who knows the customary worship of the gods (*ta peri tous theous nomima*) will also honour the gods in the lawful way?”

<sup>24</sup> The construction is found in TrGF 1.43 F 19,42 for the first time and otherwise appears only in Plato and in Xenoph. *Mem.* 1.1.5.

<sup>25</sup> “Accepting as normal,” like “recognizing,” does not get rid of the problem arising from “acknowledging,” as it implies concepts or accepted dogmas one should recognize.

not for their actions.<sup>26</sup> The inference that “word equals belief” belongs to the modern worldview and certainly not to the Athenian, according to which “words” were an integral component of any ritual act, and subject to the same rules of impiety.

*Aristophanes’ Clouds and the Question of Atheism*

We shall start our investigation of the sources with Aristophanes’ *Clouds*, which traditionally has been taken to represent the accusers’ point of view, as Plato already stated in the *Apology*. *Clouds* contains, among other things, a religious accusation against Socrates interpreted by most scholars as atheism.<sup>27</sup> However, we should try to determine the propriety of this term as a historically verifiable category in fifth century Athens. The main point deriving from the relevant passages in *Clouds* is that, in Greek culture, the assertion of the inexistence of certain gods has an axiological relevance rather than an ontological one.

In the first meeting with Socrates, Strepsiades promises he would pay the philosopher whatever price, swearing by the gods (245–46). Socrates replies (247–49):

What gods are you swearing by? First of all the gods have no legal tender (*nomisma*) for us.

Strepsiades: By whom do you swear then? By iron coins, as in Byzantion?

Socrates promises to reveal the new order of divine things (*ta theia pragmata*, 250) and introduces his new pupil to the Clouds in a parodist initiation, calling them “our gods” (*tais hemeteraisi daimosin*, 253). After their epiphany, Socrates announces the new divine order and the decadence of the old one (365–67):

<sup>26</sup> Such as Diagoras of Melos who, as Lysias, 6.17, says, “committed impiety in word,” in contrast to Andocides who committed impiety “in deed.”

<sup>27</sup> For the other aspects involved in the comedy and for Socrates as a caricature of the new sophistic trend see Muir 1985, especially 211–16.

Socrates: Only these are goddesses, all the rest is vain talk

Strepsiades: But, for the Earth! Olympian Zeus is not a god for you?

Socrates: Which Zeus! Don't talk nonsense. Zeus doesn't exist (*oud'esti*)!

After a naturalistic explanation of rain, Strepsiades concludes (380–81): “Vortex? I missed that, Zeus doesn't exist and in his place Vortex is now king.” The equation *Zeus doesn't exist = Zeus has been usurped*, is repeated at 816–28 when Strepsiades tries to teach his son Pheidippides what he has learned, summing up: “Vortex now reigns, having kicked Zeus out” (828).

The statements about the existence of gods are phrased in terms of the opposition between valid and efficacious versus invalid and non-efficacious. The denial of a god's existence is fashioned in traditional Hesiodic terms of succession: “Zeus doesn't exist” corresponds to his usurpation or replacement by another god. This is again manifest in the following exchange between Strepsiades and his son (1468–73):

Strepsiades: . . . show respect for Father Zeus!

Pheidippides: Oh, really! “Father Zeus,” you are so old-fashioned. As if Zeus were in power (*estin*).

Strepsiades: Of course he is (*estin*).

Pheidippides: No, he is not, since Vortex reigns, having kicked Zeus out.

Strepsiades: No, he did not; it was I who thought so. . . .<sup>28</sup>

The statement that Zeus no longer exists is tantamount to de-authorizing the symbols connected to Zeus. This process does not apply exclusively to natural cosmology but particularly to the social cosmology. A god “exists” insofar as he is valid and socially

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<sup>28</sup> The codified Hesiodic model of Vortex usurping Zeus implies a danger to the system of succession (see the orphic-dionysian solution). The subject evades our purpose; still we should notice that the opposition new-old entails another threat, insofar as the passage from Vortex to Zeus implies a retrogression from culture to nature, i.e., from the cultural order which Zeus guarantees to the *physis* order represented by Vortex. This inversion indicates the devaluation of the genetic cultural element in the name of *physis*, which the comedy represents by having Pheidippides beat up his father.

authoritative. In precisely this sense, the gods of the old order have lost their legal tender for Socrates and his school: as a new currency replaces the old one, it continues to exist ontologically, but no longer socially. Deauthorizing traditional gods brings about the dreadful result that, if Zeus is no longer authoritative, the oaths made in his name are no longer efficacious; at the plot level, invalidation of the traditional gods allows Strepsiades to reach his goal of not paying his debts. The issue of oaths was as all-important in Athenian society as it was in the comedy: the oath represented what was most crucial for the stability of social relations.<sup>29</sup> The strict connection between gods and oaths was already evident at 246–48, where denial of a god was tantamount to invalidating an oath. In this respect it is particularly significant that, in the same scene, Socrates' explanation of the new divine order comes as the answer to Strepsiades' question "by which god do you swear?" By the same token, the identification between Zeus, Olympian gods, and oaths appears in the dialogue between Strepsiades and Pheidippides (825ff.), as well as in Strepsiades' argument against his creditors where the lampoon of oaths results in the impossibility of collecting the debts.

In addition to the axiological plane, the non-existence of a god is asserted in terms of cultic oblivion.<sup>30</sup> When Strepsiades declares himself ready to join the think-shop way of life, the Clouds question him (423f.):

And you shall not worship (*nomieis*) another god but us:  
Chaos, the Clouds and the Tongue, and just these three?

Strepsiades: And not a word with the others, not even if I'd met them by chance:

no sacrifices, nor libations or incense offerings.

<sup>29</sup> On the importance of oaths see Giordano-Zecharya 2004.

<sup>30</sup> Similarly, the order of Zeus made Cronus and the Titans nonexistent in the sense of invalid, crossed out of the cult. Strictly speaking, if a god does not exist, he or she cannot be replaced.

The centrality of line 423 for the interpretation of Socrates' trial must be stressed: the Clouds use the same expression as the indictment, *nomizein theon*, and Strepsiades' answer leaves no doubt as to the meaning of "venerating a god" in terms of the practice of cultic acts.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, we find in this passage a request for an *exclusivity* of cultic relationship, which is the form kainotheism takes in the comedy, and which corresponds to the foundation of a new moral and educational order. Dover argues that the portrait of Socrates as an atheist is inconsistent, insofar as his rejection of traditional gods means venerating others, but the inconsistency appears only when using a modern model of *atheism as ontological denial* to understand Socrates' attitude. The comedy provides us with an emic view on Socrates' religious position: he is a god-despiser<sup>32</sup> and a god-offender as Strepsiades cries out while setting fire to the think-shop in the last scene, 1506–8:

Strepsiades: How dare you teach offending (*hybrizete*) the gods  
and spying on the bottom of the moon?  
Chase, beat and hit them, for all their crimes,  
but especially for doing injustice (*edikoun*) to the gods.

In these lines the main charge against Socrates and his school appears to be the insulting (*hybrizein*) and wronging of the gods (*adikein*, the same verb used in the indictment), rather than the denial of their existence or the introduction of new gods.

The first form of denying the existence of a traditional god is of an axiological nature, while the second is equal to cultic interruption; both result in a devaluation of the social order which the god

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. also 804ff. Muir 1985:213, translates the line as "believe in no other gods but ours," and later takes this line as representative for *nomizein* used in Diopieithes' decree: "... those who did not admit the practice of religion, the Greek word *nomizein* is the same one used by Aristophanes for believing in the gods," 215. In this statement it is again evident how deeply the notion of belief is engrained in any discourse on religion, to the point of using this term as a synonym for religious practice.

<sup>32</sup> See 225–30 and the play on words *periphrono-hyperphrono*.

guarantees and of which it constitutes an efficacious symbol. Nowhere is there a statement about ontology or about the worshippers' thoughts or spiritual adherence to the content of a dogma. In sum, the various approaches to affirming or denying gods presented in *Clouds* do not fit well with the ontological implications of atheism.<sup>33</sup>

*Xenophon's Account: When Believing is Doing*

The way Xenophon conducts his defence of Socrates against the first part of the accusation is perfectly in line with a ritualistic interpretation.<sup>34</sup> Xenophon glosses the text of the accusation with ritual arguments:

What evidence did they dispose of in arguing that he didn't venerate the gods of the polis? In fact, he openly sacrificed at home, often on the common altars of the polis and he never hid the fact that he used divination. (*Mem.* 1.1.2)

I wonder, judges, on which piece of evidence does Meletus state that I do not worship the gods the polis worships, since whoever happened to be close to me, as Meletus did, saw me sacrificing in common festivals and on public altars. (*Apol.* 11)

As for his behaviour towards the gods, it's patent that his actions and words were coherent with Pythia's responses on sacrifices, the cult of the ancestors or other similar matters. As a matter of fact, she responds that he who acts according to polis' custom is pious, and this is how Socrates acted and invited others to act. (*Mem.* 1.3.1)<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> I cannot investigate but cursorily the question of atheism in Greece, which demands a study in its own right. For an overview of the sources and bibliography cf. Winiarczyk 1984 and 1990, whose interpretation of atheism differs considerably from mine. As a general remark, I submit that one should refrain from using the word atheism, at least in all the cases where another, more precise term, is available (e.g., kainotheism).

<sup>34</sup> See Burnet 1924:104ff.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. *Mem.* 4.3.16. In 4.6.1, another dialogue between Euthydemus and Socrates about the definition of piety, an *eusebes* is a man "who honours the gods," not according his own will but according to "customs that tell how to honour the gods." See also 4.6.2–4 for the insistence on the centrality of behaving customarily.

Finally, in the *Apology's peroratio*, Socrates declares himself to be perfectly at peace, as it has not been demonstrated that he had ever committed (*pepoieka*) any of the acts attributed to him. In particular, “it has never been proven that I sacrificed to new gods instead of Zeus or Hera or the other gods, or that I swore in their names or mentioned other gods” (*Apol.* 11). From these passages, we can confirm that the accusation related to *nomizein* concerned the omission of Athenian customary worship, and the illegitimate veneration of different gods both by means of sacrifices and oaths, and by spreading this behaviour through his teaching.<sup>36</sup> Thus, Aristophanes and Xenophon concur in drawing a picture that Socrates was accused of irregularity in worship.

#### *Plato's Semantic Turn*

So “modernly” persuasive and well-written is Plato’s *Apology* that many later interpreters have held it to be the most reliable behind-the-scenes account of the trial.<sup>37</sup> However, Plato’s version is noteworthy for his non-ritualistic interpretation of the charge, diverging clearly from Xenophon’s.<sup>38</sup> In various places of the *Apology*, Plato uses the traditional expression *nomizein tous theous* that we may interpret as worshipping the gods, particularly when he discusses Meletus’ accusation (24 c): “Socrates is a wrongdoer first because he corrupts the young and does not worship the gods the city worships, but other new deities.”<sup>39</sup>

Once Socrates starts defending himself against this particular charge,

<sup>36</sup> But cf. *Mem.* 1.1.5, where Xenophon uses the expression *nomizein tous theous einai*, in contrast to the rest of the analyzed occurrences. Gigon 1953:7ff., explains this as a direct influence from Plato.

<sup>37</sup> As remarked already by Finley 1968:61; see also Price 1999:85.

<sup>38</sup> See on this divergence Hansen 1995, especially 6, and Vlastos 1991:291–93. It is quite unclear on which passages Cohen 1991:213 bases his assumption that “the definition of *asebeia* as unorthodox belief forms the basis of the trial in the accounts of Xenophon and Plato.”

<sup>39</sup> Cf. also *Apol.* 18c, 23d, 27a, and 26b.

he transforms the expression *nomizein tous theous*, “to worship the gods,” into *nomizein tous theous einai*, “to think the gods do not exist”<sup>40</sup> The verb *nomizo* is therefore no longer used in the sense of “practicing as customary” governing an accusative, but of “thinking that,” governing an infinitive clause.<sup>41</sup> This transformation reverberates throughout the whole Platonic interpretation, as if *einai* were implied in all the occurrences of *nomizein tous theous*. This is a Platonic innovation, and should therefore be considered as such.<sup>42</sup> Plato could not change the letter of the indictment but managed to warp it to his own ends, thus avoiding the need to respond to the accusation of impiety.

The Socrates of Plato argues that the accusation is inconclusive: if he is accused of introducing new gods, this implies the existence of the latter, equating in what follows the terms *daimonia*, *daimones* and *theoi*. The existence of one category (*theous*) should be logically assumed from the existence of the other (*daimonia*), as the particular is to be assumed from the existence of the general. He brings the accuser to self-contradiction (*Apol.* 14), making Meletus seem to accuse Socrates of denying the existence of gods, although asserting their existence in another way. Plato twists the charge on its head, makes it contradictory and thus inconclusive, disparaging it as a veiled attempt to hinder and punish Socrates for his successful, insinuating, and scornful pedagogical and political influence. As for the religious accusation, however, he simply avoids addressing the issue of ritual behaviour, much as he sidesteps the charge of introducing and venerating non-Athenian gods. Some scholars account for these omissions by supposing that Socrates was actually guilty from the Athenian point of view, though nonetheless a just and pious man in more universal terms. Others claim that Socrates worshipped the same gods Athens worshipped

<sup>40</sup> *Apol.* 26bff.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Fahr 1969:131–57 for a full account of this Platonic transformation.

<sup>42</sup> For Eur. *Supp.* 731–32, see Yunis 1988:65 n.18.



but with a different theological interpretation.<sup>43</sup> These patent incongruities have perhaps contributed to the view shared by most scholars that the accusation was merely a façade to hide political motivations.<sup>44</sup>

The fact that Plato omits speaking about the cultic behaviour of Socrates — an omission remarked by many scholars — is indeed revealing: with regard to customary cultic practice, it is far from understood that Socrates would have been a model of orthopraxy, as assumed recently by M. McPherran.<sup>45</sup> As I have already stated, the appraisal of the actual religious behaviour of Socrates is beyond the subject of this paper; what matters here is the fact that Plato purportedly side-steps any discussion of Socrates' cultic behaviour towards the gods of the city. To this end he bases his defence against Meletus' statement on an ontological ground, changing the very wording of the indictment. What is most noteworthy is the broad modern acceptance of Plato's wording, instead of the official version reported by all witnesses, *including Plato*. The scholars adopting Plato's personal interpretation very rarely justify or even mention the choice of the Platonic over the received version. A possible explanation for this otherwise unaccountable omission will be explored in the conclusion.

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<sup>43</sup> For the first position cf. Beckman 1979 and 1983; for the second position cf. Bodéüs 1989, McPherran 2002. McPherran reconstructs a picture of the "real" Socrates from the Platonic dialogues. His participation in the civic cult was in accordance with the Athenian way, mostly through prayer and sacrifice, but with a different interpretation of these cultic acts (undermining the assumption of reciprocity between gods and men). McPherran's interpretation of piety as "an internal matter pertaining to the soul" (176) seems to refer to a Platonic discourse which has little bearing on the Athenian point of view.

<sup>44</sup> Vlastos 1991 and Burneyat 1997 highlight that Plato's silence on Socrates' behaviour towards Athenian gods may be regarded as a sign that he was actually guilty of not believing in the gods the city believes in. Vlastos 1991:41 argues in particular "that he believes in the gods is clear enough; that he believes in the gods of the state he never says." Burneyat 1997:7ff. highlights the insistence on the term "god," arguing for a "monotheistic" position for Socrates. Both scholars clearly utilize a belief-centred interpretation of the indictment.

<sup>45</sup> McPherran 2002.

*Piety on Trial*

The final point concerns the legal aspect of the trial, and in particular the likelihood of an accusation of impiety, *asebeia*, in the form of an ontological or belief-centred argument. In this respect we should recall that in Athenian trial procedures the defence rested on rhetoric as much as the accusation; both rested on the capacity of the speaker to persuade the judges of the truth of his case. Although the charge of “impiety” was vaguely understood as wrongdoing against gods, parents and fatherland, the Athenian criminal statutes do not define the conduct that constitutes impiety, as was the case for most offences, “but rather *assume* a definition which such words imply.”<sup>46</sup> In other words, the definition was entirely subject to the evaluation of the judges, who, it should be borne in mind, were private citizens with no legal expertise whatsoever. As R.E. Allen has effectively clarified “. . . the Athenian system was unbound, except persuasively, by precedent: the elements of impiety were what *a simple majority of the dicasts on any given day thought was impious.*”<sup>47</sup> Having said that, it follows that the majority of jurymen would have had difficulty understanding a charge of *asebeia* based on a denial of gods’ existence, and even more the subtle elenctic refutation provided by Socrates; in contrast, Xenophon’s account is more plausible and consistent with the Athenian perspective. As Connor has highlighted, religious issues were prominent in the remaining speeches from the year 399 BCE, where impiety referred to ritual matters of sacrifice and profanation.<sup>48</sup> In a speech against Nicomachus, a secretary who rewrote the sacrificial calendar of Athens in the “Socratic” years 403–399, Lysias argues that,

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<sup>46</sup> Cohen 1991:208.

<sup>47</sup> Allen 1996:6.

<sup>48</sup> Connor 1991:51–52. Cf. Andocides 1 and Lysias 30. For an overview of the years of Socrates’ trial see Musti 1992:468–78, where the author also exhorts us to “reduce Socrates to his historical dimension and reflect upon the environment where he lived” (475).

on the subject of religiosity (*peri eusebeias*) we should certainly not learn from Nicomachus, but we should take into account the tradition. Our ancestors in this respect handed over to us the greatest and happiest city of Greece by sacrificing only according to the content of the *kyrbeis*: it is therefore just that we perform the same sacrifices they performed, if only for the good fortune they derived from those sacrifices. (30.18)<sup>49</sup>

This passage also sheds light on one of the main points of Socrates' indictment, namely the importance of maintaining the same form of cult as existed in the Athens of "glorious past." In this period, the more Athenian self-image crumbled, the more crucial became the need to reconstruct an identity capable of retrieving a sense of continuity with the past — however imagined and symbolic. The indictment expresses the need for continuity by attempting to exorcise a perceived threat to the connection between future and past: religious innovation was considered to undermine the link with the past and corruption of the young to sabotage the future. We can conclude that the trial of Socrates hinged on cultic matters, related both to his personal conduct and to the spreading of this behaviour through successful teaching.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> The definition of pious behaviour hinges on following traditional cult and common interest. Lysias continues, "is there a more pious man than I who wants to sacrifice according to the ancestors' way . . .?" (30.19). If personal piety is untestable from an empirical viewpoint in a belief-centred model of religion, in ancient Athens, as we can deduce from this passage, religious behaviour is empirically determinate: if you sacrifice and perform the cult according to the rules of your city, you are *eusebes*.

<sup>50</sup> This is clearly what is referred to in the charge of "corrupting the young," and in Lysias' mention of the fact that Socrates was condemned for his words. It is beyond the scope of this paper to tackle the question of "who Socrates really was and what he said," including the question of his defence speeches. The endeavour to measure the distance between the Socrates of the accusers and the Socrates of the apologetics must be another quest.

*The Category of "Belief"*<sup>51</sup>

The terms "belief," "to believe," and "faith" have come to represent *the* distinctive features of religion, or an inescapable term of reference. Today, however, the history of these terms is no longer a *terra incognita*.<sup>52</sup>

More than thirty years ago, R. Needham argued against the use of the terms related to "belief" in describing other cultures since they represent an undeclared and misleading generalization about a concept otherwise immaterial to non-Christian cultures. These terms, he argues, are far from representing a universal category or feature of human nature; rather they constitute *the* idiosyncratic category of the Christian understanding of religion.<sup>53</sup>

We may add that what is beyond translation is not one singular sense of the word "belief," but precisely the conflation of three meanings into one word, as previously mentioned. This conflation is the outcome of a unique and specific historical process related

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<sup>51</sup> I will provide only a summarily account of the question. For a more extensive treatment cf. Needham 1972:40–50, and Pouillon 1979:43–51.

<sup>52</sup> Similarly Sabbatucci 1990:5 claims that, "The history of religions has questioned the objects of faith but never faith in itself. . . . Faith in something, no matter what, would seem, the heart of each religion". This monograph, however uninformed about most of the scholarship we are discussing, has the merit of putting the concept of faith in an historical perspective, as born out of an historical phenomenon, the early martyr "confessors" and the specific soteriological connotations it is fraught with. See Needham 1972:21.

<sup>53</sup> The label "Christian" is used in this paper with the specific intent of bringing the terms related to *belief* and *faith* back to their historical origin. With this disclaimer in mind, however, it is apparent that the use of this label does not negate the fact that any person brought up in a Western environment may use "Christian" terms and categories regardless of their personal religious identity. Needham's valuable monograph represents, to the best of my knowledge, the most thorough investigation of this question. See also Luckman 1971, which questions the usefulness of this term, and speaks of a "misapplication" of these categories to "archaic societies." His critique of "belief" is however limited by the use of an evolutionistic model.

to the development of Christianity, particularly the accretion of the sense of *asserting and accepting a type of existence* that is rationally and empirically unaccountable for, to the sense of *trusting*.<sup>54</sup> R. Bultmann has succinctly expressed this as follows: “In the OT the righteous (in faithfulness and obedience) believe in God on the basis of His acts. . . . In the NT, however, it is precisely God’s act which has to be believed.”<sup>55</sup>

This idea of trust is somehow closer to the Roman than to the Christian conception of *credere* in the sense, as C. Grottanelli has described it, of having trust in a bond of reciprocity “where gods were both creditors and debtors.”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> King 2003:277, tackling the problem of belief and Roman religion, sees a contradiction in Needham’s conclusion that the term *belief* is of no benefit for analysis. In particular, he stresses that, “if ‘belief’ is specifically Western or Christian . . . then it must have a specific meaning or an identifiable range of meanings. Otherwise, how would one know whether the concept is Christian?” However, King not only simplifies, almost beyond recognition, the complexity of Needham’s arguments (see for example Needham 1972:122–24), but he appears to miss the issue of the semantic status of *belief* as I have outlined it. The paper presents otherwise interesting models for understanding Roman religion as a non-Christian religion, though with the basic shortcoming of neglecting Linder and Scheid 1993, which is the most important contribution on the very same subject of belief and Roman religion, see *infra*.

<sup>55</sup> Bultmann 1968:215. Evans-Pritchard 1956:9 has expressed a similar difficulty about the use of *believe* in his description of Nuer religion: “God’s existence is taken for granted by everybody. Consequently, when we say, as we can do, that all Nuer have faith in God, the word ‘faith’ must be understood in the Old Testament sense of ‘trust’. . . . There is in any case, I think, no word in the Nuer language which could stand for ‘I believe’.”

<sup>56</sup> Grottanelli 1989–90:48; building on Benveniste’s analysis of *credere*, the scholar tackles, among other things, the question of reciprocity and trust as understood in the Latin verb. In Grottanelli 1994, he extends his analysis to the notions of credence (as expressed in *credo*) and credit, thereby connecting trust in a god and contractual obligation which amount to the reciprocity based relationship of humans and gods. See *infra* for the history and transformation of this connection in relation to Plato.

In addition to the semantic dimension, J. Pouillon has explored the cosmological assumptions implied in belief-statements. He shows that the distinction between belief in God and belief in a friend is rooted in the cultural distinction between a natural world and a supernatural world. “In our culture,” Pouillon argues, “such a distinction seems so characteristic of religion — both for those who refuse it and for those who accept it — that religion and in particular the so-called primitive religions are currently defined by beliefs in supernatural powers and the cult given to them.”<sup>57</sup>

Moreover, this distinction entails two distinct modes of existence: the existence of man and man’s world, and the existence of God and God’s world. The difference between them is more an ontological gulf than a separation; consequently, we apprehend these two planes of existence through two separate modalities: perception and belief, with existence in the natural world on one hand being perceived, and the ultra-mundane world of God being believed in on the other. Belief-statements refer to an absolute reality, inaccessible to empirical perception.

In a belief-centred model of religion, the truth expressed in a religious dogma “does not relate to the ordinary matter-of-fact world of everyday things but to metaphysics,”<sup>58</sup> and religious tenets such as the existence of God are, in the terms of M. Southwold, “empirically indeterminate,” not being open to empirical verification.<sup>59</sup> Yet, if we turn to Greek material, the situation is very different; gods are all but metaphysical, merged as they are in the interconnectedness of the world, visible and present in every aspect of the world and human activity.<sup>60</sup> Zeus’ existence is not empirically indeterminate,

<sup>57</sup> Pouillon 1979:44.

<sup>58</sup> Leach 1967: 45.

<sup>59</sup> Southwold 1978:633 and *passim*. This view is consistent with the definition of Christian faith as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1).

<sup>60</sup> For extensive treatments of these aspects of Greek gods and cosmology, see Vernant 1974:117ff., and 1995:5–12; Oudemans and Lardinois 1987: 92–96 and *passim*.

insofar as Zeus coincides with so many aspects of daily life: to deny the gods would be to deny the world altogether. This is the pivotal point of the semantic issue being addressed in this paper: the analysis of a culture in terms of belief implies that the same dualistic cosmological model governs the culture under examination. The projection of the emic category of belief results, therefore, in a manifest heuristic fallacy, since the dichotomy is nowhere to be found in non-monotheistic cultures.

M. Linder and J. Scheid, in their insightful review of Roman religion from the point of view of belief, describe Roman “belief” as an act, a *savoir faire* rather than a *savoir penser* (giving their paper the programmatic title “Quand croire c’est faire”). Their analysis is successful in sketching the distinctive features of both Roman and Christian religions, and by writing “faith” and “belief” in quotation marks they help to maintain a distance from these terms. However, this contribution falls short of calling fully into question the usefulness of the notions of belief and faith. The scholars seek out those religious and social tenets that might stand for Christian beliefs: again, this has the effect of implicitly accepting the discourse of belief as the objective unit of measurement, however stretched and upturned, of a religion *qua* religion.<sup>61</sup>

In attempting to use the term “belief” productively, we could strive to make a careful distinction, as does Southwold who equates believing with “holding as true”; however, we would always run the risk of conflating meanings on our own behalf or on that of our

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<sup>61</sup> Linder and Scheid 1993:50. Interestingly, the authors seem to employ an “apologetic” tone, defending Roman religion against the Christian-borne charge of being a cold and empty religion. See particularly 48 and 57 where, concluding their arguments, they say, “S’il faut chercher dans les mentalités romaines du début de l’ère chrétienne une foi semblable à celle des religions révélées, ce n’est donc pas dans l’appareil religieux proprement dit qu’il faut la chercher. . . . La “foi” des Romains était plus large et englobait le religieux” (58). Here, it seems evident that belief and faith are accepted as a universal category.

audience.<sup>62</sup> King proposes to define belief as a “conviction that an individual (or group of individuals) holds independently of the need for empirical support.”<sup>63</sup> This definition, if it is such, further confuses Christian and non-Christian contexts. Moreover, I cannot see why we should continue using a term, however traditional and evocative, at the risk of warping our understanding, particularly since other terms such as *conviction*, *opinion* or *understanding* are available. As Pouillon states, we would be using a category that “isn’t even clear for us, or at least is a disintegrated category, whose disintegration is precisely *a singular cultural phenomenon*.”<sup>64</sup>

To conclude this assessment, the polysemic conflation and the dualistic cosmology inherent in the term *belief* make the use of this category a heuristic fallacy. I suggest therefore that the term be carefully avoided in referring to non-monotheistic religious traditions, since *belief* is not one of those “scholarly constructs of which the definitions remain up for negotiation and adaptation.”<sup>65</sup> We cannot easily escape the cognitive condition in which the uncritical use of cultural keywords results in the projection of an implicit model upon the reality studied.

### Conclusion

As the examination of Socrates’ indictment has shown, in ancient Greece it would be better to speak of a community of performers rather than a community of believers.<sup>66</sup>

“Greek religion” is, in turn, to be understood primarily as civic in the sense that the municipal, local dimension saturates all its spheres;

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<sup>62</sup> Southwald 1978:628, 631.

<sup>63</sup> King 2003:278.

<sup>64</sup> Pouillon 1979:47, my italics.

<sup>65</sup> See Bremmer 1998:30, referring to the terms “religion” and “ritual.”

<sup>66</sup> To paraphrase a famous Herodotean definition, Greeks are those who sacrifice in the same way and share the same idea of sacred space: Hdt. 8.144.2.



the gods were one with their *polis* and its citizens, *politai*.<sup>67</sup> Posited at the opposite end of the ecumenical purview of Christianity, Greek religiosity measures piety by adherence to the custom of the city, the *nomos poleos* as Xenophon puts it, and what matters is “to worship the gods the way *the polis* itself worships.” Definitions of piety and impiety depend therefore on what polis you belong to and not on what you believe in or how.<sup>68</sup>

Looking at the trial from the Athenian point of view, it is noteworthy how incongruent Plato’s account is in this respect, and we might wonder why the Platonic interpretation of the indictment has been so successful, as opposed to those of Xenophon and Aristophanes.<sup>69</sup> G. Vlastos has argued that Socrates’ gods were contrary to Athenian tradition, in that they were entirely good and moral, stripped of their fundamental ambiguity and somehow rationalized.<sup>70</sup> I agree with Brickhouse and Smith on the anachronism of this view: “There is no ancient evidence for supposing that his contemporaries were troubled by Socrates’ alleged ethical trans-

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<sup>67</sup> The focus of Greek religious life was the worship of the gods and that relied ultimately on the customs and laws, oral and written, of the city and/or the group or subgroup to which each individual belonged. For an insightful account of actual workings of this system see Sourvinou-Inwood 1990 and 1988, a ground-breaking contribution to the understanding of Greek religion. For Athenian religion, see Parker 1996.

<sup>68</sup> If we would really want to infer an accepted religious tenet from ancient Greece, that would be: you shall sacrifice appropriately to the gods according to the rules of your *polis*; or in the sense that Linder and Scheid have outlined for Roman religion, Greek piety “était avant tout un acte. C’était un savoir-faire et non un savoir-penser” (Linder and Scheid 1993:50).

<sup>69</sup> This, however, does not imply that he was wrong in his portrayal of the historical Socrates. On the contrary, I am inclined to think that he may have been more reliable in this respect than the other sources. His adherence to Socrates’ actual position may account for his wilful distortion of the Athenian point of view on the trial. Once again, what is at stake in this paper is the Athenian *perception* of Socratic religiosity and not Socrates’ religiosity.

<sup>70</sup> Vlastos 1991.

formation of the gods, *however revolutionary that transformation may seem to us.*"<sup>71</sup>

I would further argue that it is precisely the relevance to *our* conception of religiosity that has made the Platonic version so authoritative, despite its incongruence with the other accounts. Socratic religiosity *iuxta* Platonic understanding contains an outstanding degree of Christian "anticipation." Socrates is represented as spreading an idea of piety as service to gods without any personal advantage, a selfless worship that, unlike contemporary Athenian practice, does not aim to attain a personal benefit, and is more or less explicitly evaluated as a superior conception of religion in this respect. A good example is Vlastos' account of Socratic piety: "From religion as Socrates understands it magic is purged — all of it, both white and black. In the practice of Socratic piety man would not pray to god, 'My will be done through thee,' but 'Thy will be done through me'."<sup>72</sup> In this passage Christian undertones emerge quite clearly, as well as derogatory assessments of Greek religion, labelled "magic" in Frazerian fashion. Stripping the relationship with gods from any form of "credit" from Greek religiosity may be seen as a Socratic-Platonic innovation taken up later by Christianity.<sup>73</sup>

I would add that Socrates has been seen specifically as a *figura* of Jesus by many Christian authors.<sup>74</sup> This association lies presumably in the fact that both figures sustain an allegedly superior religiosity to the one of the culture of their times, and both are met with an allegedly radical opposition by their own people. This more or less hidden comparison leads to a devaluation of the peoples in question for not having recognized the superiority of the

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<sup>71</sup> Brickhouse and Smith 2002:211, my italics.

<sup>72</sup> Vlastos 1996:155–56.

<sup>73</sup> Grottanelli 1994:673.

<sup>74</sup> See the sources on Socrates as prefiguration of Jesus from Justin to Clement, gathered in Giannantoni 1971:499ff.

new religion. For example, Burnyeat states that Socrates' condemnation shows "the impiety of Athenian religion," adding that,

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 out of ignorance. For they had the *wrong religion*, and he was the first martyr for the *true religion*. . . .<sup>75</sup>

Interestingly, the terms chosen in Burnyeat's assessment of Socratic as opposed to Athenian religious positions seem to reproduce the Christian opposition of *vera* and *falsa religio*.<sup>76</sup>

The trial of Socrates is a subject that rouses a high degree of moral involvement in many scholars, sometimes at the expense of maintaining the appropriate distance from the historical object. While such an involvement may not be undesirable in itself, it easily leads to a misuse of contemporary categories in interpreting the past.

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<sup>75</sup> Burnyeat 1997:10, my italics.

<sup>76</sup> See Bremmer 1998:10, on this opposition.

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