Divinus Plato: Is Plato a Religious Figure?

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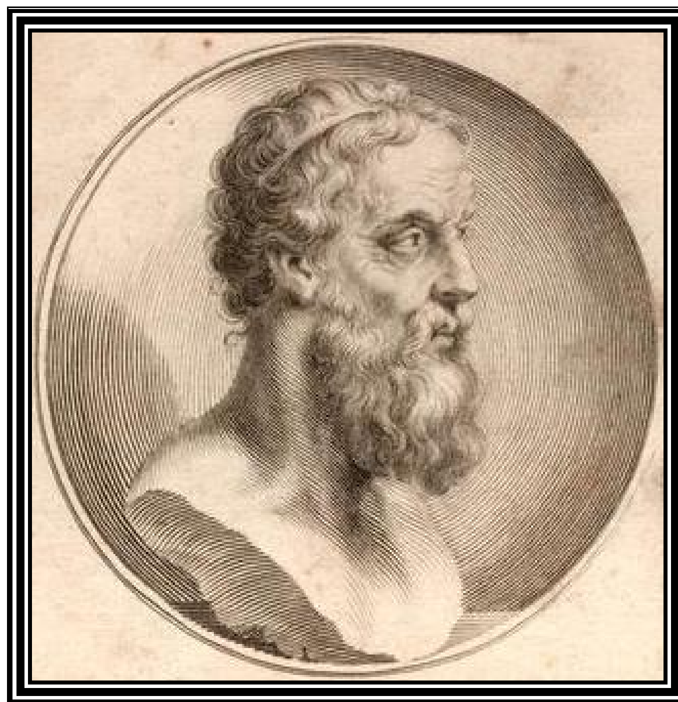

Plato, by Philipp Killan; drawing of copper engraving
by Joachim von Sandrart (fl.1670)

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ABSTRACT

Should we view Plato only as a philosopher, or may we also approach him as a religious figure: a prophet, sage, priest, or shaman, who is in some sense divinely inspired, and whom a superintending Providence supplied for the benefit of humanity? Historically, the view of Plato as a religious figure has been common, but in recent centuries it has been dismissed by a prevailing narrow rationalism in academic and scholarly circles. Perhaps it is time to re-open the question. We review arguments supporting the proposition that Plato is a figure with religious significance. The aim is not to settle the question here, but to pave the way for continued discussion.

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INTRODUCTION

Should we view Plato not only as a philosopher, but also as a *religious* figure. This is not a mere theoretical question; it has important implications for *how* we read Plato and *what* we hope to learn from his works.[1] If Plato is only a rational philosopher — an ancient version of John Locke or Bertrand Russell — then we would expect his writings to contain logical arguments and theories, some correct and some incorrect, some interesting and illuminating and others perhaps less so. But if Plato is something more — an divinely *inspired* sage or prophet — we might hope to find in his works more-than-ordinary human wisdom and material of spiritual importance.

To suggest Plato may be a religious figure is scarcely new. Many ancient Greek and Roman writers — especially in the Neoplatonist tradition — saw Plato as an inspired prophet and his works as carrying religious and mystical meanings. In the Renaissance, when Plato's complete works first reached Western Europe, and particularly in the writings of Marsilio Ficino, we often see a willingness to recognize Plato as a religious or semi-religious figure even by orthodox Christian thinkers.

Here we advance arguments in favor of the hypothesis. The discussion will be brief and concise, as befits a tentative proposal. We wish more to open than to settle the question here; if Plato is indeed a figure with spiritual significance, this is ultimately best proven not so much by scholarly argument as by ones individual, experiential engagement with Plato's writings and ideas.

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[1] For example, if Plato is a religious figure it may effect how we read the *Republic*. Is this a work on political science, a blueprint for the optimal government of a State, as has been the consensus opinion for many decades? Or is it a sublime allegory for the governance of ones soul, a work comparable to, say, the Bhagavid-Gita, which we ought to approach as something sacred? There might be a possible objection by those who may wish to reserve a concept like divine inspiration to orthodox religious figures in, say, the Judaeo-Christian tradition. We may avoid this issue here by simply allowing that 'divine inspiration' is not necessarily an all-or-none principle. Rather than make an absolute distinction between works that are completely and purely the result of divine inspiration (say, the Bible), such that no element of human error could enter into its composition, we may grant different *degrees* or even *forms* of supernatural insight and inspiration. Thus to suggest that Plato may be to some significant degree divinely inspired, we merely propose what, for example, the Roman Catholic Church (see, e.g., *Nostra Aetate*, *Fides et Ratio*) already allows as true of the sacred scriptures of non-Christian religions.

SOCRATES AS PROPHET

Clearly whether Plato's teacher, Socrates, was a religious figure has some bearing on this question. The stronger the evidence that Socrates was not only a philosopher but a prophet, priest, or holy man, the stronger the case that Plato, his most eminent disciple, was also.

Modern scholars have in a general way addressed the religious *beliefs* of Socrates (see, for example, McPherran, 1996; Morgan, 1992; Smith & Woodruff, 2000; and works cited therein). As helpful as this literature is, it is limited by its emphasis on the *rational* aspects of Socrates' religiosity. Less attention has been devoted to considering him as a *philosopher-prophet-shaman*, in the way that, for example, Kingsley (1995, 1999) has suggested we ought to see figures like Empedocles, Heraclitus, Parmenides, and Pythagoras.

If divinely appointed prophets do exist (and we have no scientific reason to exclude the possibility), then it must be allowed that Socrates displayed many features consistent with this role (Ghaffari, 2011; Bussanich, 1999, 2006, 2013). Socrates:

a) was appointed to his mission by a Delphic oracle (*Apology* 20e–23c);
b) took this as a divine command which must be obeyed (*Apology* 28e–29a, 30a-c, 33c);
c) understood his work as that of "rebuking" the unvirtuous and exhorting them to moral reformation, and the "perfection of souls" (*Apology* 29d, 29e-30b, 30e–31b; 38a; cf. 41e);
d) considered himself a "servant of Apollo," endowed with prophetic vision (*Phaedo* 85b);
e) believed in oracles, divination, prophecy, and prophetic dreams (*Apology* 33c, *Crito* 44a–b, *Phaedo*, 60e;[2]
f) was utterly convinced of the soul's immortality and did not fear death (*Phaedo* 117a–118a);
g) prayed frequently (Jackson, 1971; cf. Mayhew 2008);
h) was warned of impending danger by a personal daemon or 'sign';[3]
i) often experienced illuminative trances or ecstasies (*Symposium* 220c-d; 175b-d);
j) was taught or initiated into "mysteries" by the mantic priestess, Diotima (*Symposium* 201d–212a);
k) spent his last days composing a hymn to Apollo (*Phaedo* 60d); and
l) pious to the end, his last recorded words requested the sacrifice of a cock to Asclepius *Phaedo* 118a).[4]

Socrates' famous martyrdom fits the prophetic pattern. His daily persecutions are less known.

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[2] Xenophon confirms the importance that Socrates attached to divination, oracles, and dreams (*Memorabilia* 1.1.3, 1.1.6–7, 1.4.14–15).

[3] *Apol* 27b-e, 31c–32a, 40a-c; 41d; *1 Alcib* 103a-b, 105e–106a; *Euthyph* 272e–273a; *Phaedo* 242b-d; *Theag* 128d–129e; and minor references in *Theat* 151a, *Euthyph* 3b, and *Rep* 6.496c. Also *Xenophon*: *Memorabilia* 1.1.3–5, 4.8.1; *Apol* 12–13; *Symp* 8.5. Cf. Plutarch *De Gen Socr*, Apuleius *De Deo Socr,* and Plotinus *Enn* 3.4.

[4] The cock is sacred to Apollo; Asclepius, the god of healing and medicine, was considered Apollo's son.

While the idealized Socrates of Plato's works seems a man respected by all, even adversaries, Diogenes Laertes (2.5.6[21]) relates:

> And very often, while arguing and discussing points that arose, he was treated with great violence and beaten, and pulled about, and laughed at and ridiculed by the multitude. But he bore all this with great equanimity. So that once, when he had been kicked and buffeted about, and had borne it all patiently, and some one expressed his surprise, he said, "Suppose an ass had kicked me would you have had me bring an action against him?" (Yonge, 1853, p.65)

Concerning point (*h*) we supply some further observations. The nature of Socrates' famous episodes of standing motionless are subject to some disagreement. The data are scant and much hinges on a few ambiguous terms in the original Greek. One view is that these episodes were periods of intense intellectual activity — getting lost in thought as he grappled with a complex philosophical problem. The other alternative is that these were religious experiences.

Plato describes two such episodes, both in the *Symposium*. They are so different in character, however, that we are possibly dealing with two different categories of experience. In the first (*Symposium* 174a–175d), Socrates is walking to a dinner party to honor Agathon, falls behind his companions, steps into a portico, and becomes lost in thought. The experience perhaps lasted no more than an hour, because he managed to arrive at the party before festivities began. Clearly this experience was not planned by Socrates beforehand.

The second experience is related by Alcibiades in *Symposium* 220c-d, and concerns Socrates' actions during the siege of Potidea. Socrates was observed to stand motionless, rapt in meditation for a full day, from dawn to dawn. It is significant that at the end he "prayed to the Sun." Here there is the possibility of a deliberately planned spiritual exercise.

According to Gellius (*Attic Nights* 2.1.1–3), this was a habitual practice of Socrates:

> Among voluntary tasks and exercises for strengthening his body for any chance demands upon its endurance we are told that Socrates habitually practised this one: he would stand, so the story goes, in one fixed position, all day and all night, from early dawn until the next sunrise, open-eyed, motionless, in his very tracks and with face and eyes riveted to the same spot in deep meditation [*cogitabundus*], as if his mind and soul had been, as it were, withdrawn from his body. When Favorinus in his discussion of the man's fortitude and his many other virtues had reached this point, he said: "He often stood from sun to sun, more rigid than the tree trunks."

As Bussanich (2013, pp. 298–300) has noted this is comparable to ascetical practices found in various oriental religions.

What was Socrates doing at Potidea and in his other day-long meditations? A poet's imagination suggests one possibility:

> The famed Athenian, he who woo'd from heaven

> Philosophy the fair, to dwell with men,[5]
> And form their manners, not inflame their pride,
> While o'er his head, as fearful to molest
> His labouring mind, the stars in silence slide,
> And seem all gazing on their future guest,
> See him soliciting his ardent suit
> In private audience: all the live-long night,
> Rigid in thought, and motionless, he stands;
> Nor quits his theme, or posture, till the sun
> Disturbs his nobler intellectual beam,
> And gives him to the tumult of the world.[6]

Is it just possible that at Potidea or other such times Socrates pleaded with heaven that philosophy might "dwell with men" and save them? Why would he *not* do so? Such is the work of a holy man and prophet. Obviously we are not expected to take poetic fancy as fact here. But it does serve to remind us not be too limiting in our views of Socrates, and to allow that the modern rationalist stereotype of him developed over the last 100 years may be very incomplete inadequate.

PLATONIC SALVATION

As in the case of Socratets, modern scholarship has similarly tended to neglect or avoid an authentic and full engagement with Plato's spirituality.[7] Here we supply some reasons to question this.

Platonic piety. Throughout his works Plato reveals himself to be deeply pious,[8] ever mindful of the perils of *hubris*, and concerned with prayer (see, e.g., Mahew, 2008). He is clearly familiar with Orphic and Pythagorean teachings and shows a deep interest in religious rites and mysteries.[9] It is not know for certain, yet it would seem fairly plausible to suggest, that Plato was initiated into the Mysteries of Eleusis.

Salvation of souls. Both Socrates and Plato are explicitly concerned with the *salvation* of the human soul. This is a central theme in Plato's works, giving his corpus unity and coherence. Salvation of the soul is the *contest of contests* (*Gorgias* 526e). To this glorious venture all else should be subordinated. *Fair is the prize, and the hope great*! (*Phaedo* 114c-d).

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[5] "*Socrates autem primus philosophiam devocavit e coelo, et in urbibus colloeavit, et in domes etiam introduxit*." (Socrates first called philosophy down from heaven, and gave it a place in cities, and introduced it even into men's homes.). Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 5.4.

[6] Edward Young, *Night Thoughts*, 1853; Ninth Night, lines 181–190, 192.

[7] Noteworthy counter-examples are Paul Elmer More (1921), Cushman (1958), and Avni (1968).

[8] Dodds (1945, p. 22) cites Wilamowitz' assertion that "the memories of a pious childhood always lived in Plato," and even grew stronger with advancing years.

[9] It is of often overlooked that the entire conversation in the *Republic* takes place during a night-long religious festival to Bendis, the Thracian Artemis (*Rep* 1.327a–1.328b; on Bendis, see Janouchová, 2013).

The salvation of the soul is arguably the principal theme of the *Republic*. Near the end of the work in Book 10, after presenting the Myth of Er, Plato emphasizes the immense stakes: not just one's worldly happiness, but something far greater —the fate of ones immortal soul (10.618c–d). Socrates begins to sum up:

> And here, my dear Glaucon, is the *supreme peril of our human state*; and therefore the *utmost* care should be taken. Let each one of us *leave every other kind of knowledge and seek and follow one thing only*, if peradventure he may be able to learn and may find some one who will make him able to *learn and discern between good and evil*, and so to choose always and everywhere the better life as he has opportunity. (10.618c, Jowett, p. 335; italics added)

Then in the work's very last paragraph Socrates concludes saying:

> Wherefore my counsel is, that we *hold fast ever to the heavenly way and follow after justice and virtue always, considering that the soul is immortal* and able to endure every sort of good and every sort of evil. Thus shall we live dear to one another and to the gods, both while remaining here and when, like conquerors in the games who go round to gather gifts, we receive our reward. And it shall be well with us both in this life and in the pilgrimage of a thousand years which we have been describing. (10.621c–d, Jowett, 1892, italics added)

These passages and many similar ones make it very clear that Plato's main concern in the *Republic* is with the welfare of the soul, not the structure and activities of a physical city. The dialogue begins and ends with, and never loses sight of, the consideration of justice in the soul.

Guthrie's summary bears repeating:

> Essentially however the *Republic* is not a piece of political theory but an allegory of the individual human spirit, the *psyche*. The city is one which we may 'found in ourselves' by directing the stream of *eros* within us so that it flows most strongly towards wisdom and knowledge, under whose guidance the passions and appetites too can find fuller satisfaction…. Goodness and happiness (united in the phrase *eu prattein*, to do well) are found by carrying to completion the unfinished philosophy of Socrates.… care only for the soul and its ultimate good, knowing that its best element, the philosophic, *is what unites us with the divine and lives for ever*. Act always in the knowledge that the soul's association with the body is only a brief episode, or series of episodes, in its eternal existence. In that faith Socrates died … *and the whole force of Plato's remarkable mind was directed at proving that he was right*. (Guthrie, p. 561; italics added)

IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL

Plato is clearly concerned with the immortality of the human soul, and presents a dozen or more arguments and proofs for it in his dialogues. It is a central premise of his philosophy.

In *Republic* 10.608d, Socrates asks Glaucon, "Have you never perceived … that our soul is immortal and never perishes?" Glaucon looks amazed and replies, "No, by Zeus, not I; but are you able to declare this?" Socrates responds, "I certainly ought to be … and I think you too can, for it is nothing hard."

Socrates seems not only fully convinced that the soul is immortal, but also that it is not difficult to see this. He then produces the *vitiating principle* argument for the soul's immortality (10.608e–611a): every thing has its own principle of destruction, unique to it and innate (e.g., for a body, disease); if a thing is destroyed, it is only by this unique, endogenous principle; the soul has a unique destructive principle, namely vice; yet even the worst vice is not sufficient to completely kill the soul; and since nothing else besides a thing's internal destructive principle can make it totally perish, the soul must be immortal.

Another proof, more well known, Plato advances in the proem to the Chariot Allegory in *Phaedrus* (245c–246a): the *self-moved mover* argument. This asserts that, while the soul moves the body, and it moves itself, it is itself not moved by anything external to it. Since being destroyed would imply movement of some sort, the soul, not moved by anything extrinsic, cannot be destroyed and must be imperishable.

The most sustained attention Plato devotes to immortality of the soul is in the *Phaedo*, which, in fact, is also traditionally called *On the Soul*. Here he presents four elaborate proofs, along with some lesser arguments. The proofs are as follows:

i. *Cyclicity argument* (70c–72e). All things proceed from their opposites. Just as death proceeds from life, life must proceed from death. Therefore the soul cannot permanently perish.

ii. *Innate knowledge* argument (72e–78b). It appears that we know things that we have not learned in this lifetime — as shown by the fact that that when they are made salient, we grasp them immediately and they seem already familiar.[10] This suggests to Plato that we have lived before in a pre-existence; and if our souls existed before this life, they will exist after this life.

iii. *Affinity argument* (78b–84b): there are two levels of reality — the temporal and changing, and the Eternal and immutable; the soul has an affinity for eternal things (e.g., Platonic Forms; Truth, Beauty and Moral Goodness; mathematical and religious truths); therefore it must in it's own nature be eternal.

iv. *Form of Life argument* (102b–107b). The soul is not only alive itself, but it gives life to the body. Therefore it is intimately connected with the essence or Form of Life. Hence it would be illogical or inconsistent for the soul itself to perish.

The famous speeches of Diotima in the *Symposium* 201–212 revolve around the subject of immortality. Several senses of immortality are pursued, such as the begetting children and the

[10] This is another favorite subject of Plato, discussed most famously in the *Meno*.

imparting of ideas and virtue to other people, before addressing immortality of soul in the religious sense. The overall drift is that human beings seem exceptionally interested in immortality and orient much of their lives to striving for it. This would not be logical unless immortality was at least potentially possible.

Among the Plato's lesser arguments for the soul's immortality is an appeal to tradition and authority: honored and trustworthy figures of the past have taught it (*Meno* 81a-b). Another argument is that human beings seem to have a limitless capacity for knowledge, which would have no purpose if the soul did not outlive the body.

Finally there is an argument from justice in the tenth book of the *Republic*: unless there are rewards or punishment after this life, it would violate our innate sense of justice. For example, an evil man could avoid punishment for misdeeds by dying.

It's interesting that, although Plato insists we should be convinced of the soul's immortality, none of these arguments in a strict logical sense entail the proposition, and we should not doubt Plato knows this.[11]

Then why does he make these arguments, and how are we supposed to know the soul is immortal? Here we must recall Plato's epistemological method in the dialogues. This is to not impart a doctrine by force of rational argument so much as to elicit an intuitive insight (i.e., recollection or *anamnesis*). Rational arguments (dialectic) serve to focus the attention and heighten interest. Thus, by applying dialectic to the subject of the soul's immortality — perhaps in the process of seeing why an argument isn't fully convincing — we may catch a glimpse of our own soul.[12] And in that act we may also see that it is of such a nature that it could not perish.

We have another clue in the *Apology* 40–41. When Socrates decides to appear in court for his sentence — which was likely going to be death — even though he could have fled into exile, he says that he's not afraid to die. He is convinced the soul is immortal, and death is no harm. However in explaining the source of the confidence he does not allude to any his rational proofs. Rather, what convinces him is that his personal daemon or guide, which has often spoken and warned him of impending danger, was now silent. This suggests the involvement of a form of faith[13] or trust.

Yes, in the past his voice has come and warned of danger many times, so it is reliable *evidence*. But to go from reliable evidence to complete *conviction* involve something more than inductive, probabilistic generalization.

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[11] "That the supreme dialectician Plato was himself unaware of what is so readily perceived by every puny whipster who thinks to get his sword is to me unthinkable." (Shorey, 1905)

[12] "Undoubtedly it is the highest possible exercise of our powers for the soul itself to see the soul," Cicero, *Tuscul Disp* 1.22 (Peabody, pp. 38–39). Book 1 *Tusculan Disputations* contains an extremely valuable and insightful presentation of many of Plato's arguments for the soul's immortality.

[13] Certain conviction without rational explanation is one operational definition of faith.

Plato's message to us, then, is that (1) we should be convinced of the soul's immortality soul, by (2) by considering some of his rational proofs as a dialectical or spiritual exercise, and so perhaps getting a glimpse of the soul; and (3) following Socrates' example, trusting a certain implicit or innate knowledge — a kind of faith — we have in the soul's immortality. Finally we have the example of Socrates' great calm and confidence in the face of death, such that he looked forward to it as something positive, his mission on earth having come to an end.

If we do consider Plato a religious figure, it is worth noting how a integral role the intellect plays in his spirituality. We do not find this in the mainstream Christian or Judaic tradition.[14]

Finally, some mention should be made about the subject of reincarnation. In the Myth of Er and other Platonic myths, a *literal* reading would indicate that Plato believes in reincarnation: that the human soul may be reborn into this world again. It is true that many ancient commentators, both his advocates and opponents, understood these passages as meaning Plato believed in reincarnation. However this is by no means clear. These passage can also be understood as allegorical (e.g., one is, in this lifetime, continually being, reborn, as it will, and ones mental disposition now will determine ones mental disposition later). Note also that it would be very uncharacteristic of Plato to commit himself to such a definite doctrine as reincarnation, especially without proof or analysis. (For an extended discussion of this point and arguments in favor of the allegorical view, see Uebersax. 2007.)

LIKENESS TO GOD

Sedley (1999) points out that if an educated Roman of the 2nd century were asked what the main aim of Platonism is — what is its *summum bonum*, such that it is distinguished from other philosophical schools — the response would be that the goal of its ethics is to achieve *likeness to God* (*homoiosis theoi*) insofar as this is possible (*Theaetetus* 176a-b, *Timaeus* 90c).

This is another important concept for Plato, and he refers to it often. We become like God by: *thinking thoughts that are immortal and divine* (*Timaeus* 90); stabilizing the revolutions of our thinking so that they match the celestial majesty and order of the heavens (*Timaeus* 47c); contemplating eternal verities through an ascension of mind effected by control of passions (*Phaedrus* 248a, 252d-e); developing a divine character by being temperate and virtuous (*Laws* 4.716c); and engaging in *sacrifice and communion with the gods continually, by prayers and offerings and devotions of every kind* (*Laws* 4. 716d).

That Platonic *homoiosis theoi* is a *religious* notion can hardly be questioned. It is also, arguably, a distinctly radical suggestion. It is not obviously present in indigenous religions or in Judaism, for example. Even within Christianity, which has been heavily influenced by Platonism, the very

[14] We find scholastic theology in these traditions, but not necessarily the systematic effort to use dialectic for the express purpose of spiritual growth.

notion may strike some as impious. It certainly runs diametrically opposed, at least in spirit, to the Calvinist doctrine of man's innate depravity.

HAGIOGRAPHY

In the centuries following his death, many stories and legends about Plato arose (Riginos, 1976). While we may hesitate to take hagiographical evidence at face value, it is significant that Plato's reputation attracted it. Further, in the degree to which these stories resemble those told of accepted religious founders, prophets, and saints, they are evidence, albeit limited, that Plato was a religious figure.

One legend (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 3.2) concerns Plato's parthenogenesis (virgin birth).[15] It is said that Plato's father, Ariston, had a dream in which he was told to avoid relations with his wife, Amphictione. She subsequently gave birth to Plato, the father being Apollo. As a mythic motif, parthenogenesis is relatively rare and in any case extraordinary. It is associated with Jesus, the Buddha, various gods and goddesses. It therefore indicates the exceptionally high esteem in which Plato was held, and his being considered a religious figure in the ancient world.

Another story tells that, the night before Socrates met the young Plato for the first time, he had a dream in which a cygnet settled in his lap, developed adult plumage, and flew off uttering a sweet song that charmed all hearers. The next day a companion brought Plato to him and Socrates remarked, "Here is the swan of my dream."[16]

Yet another story (*Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy* 6.8–13) relates how, after Plato's death, a woman inquired of an oracle whether it was appropriate to honor him with a stele or statue. The oracle approved, saying that by honoring such "blessed ones" as Plato one would gain one grace.[17]

We should also note that many renowned philosophers of antiquity, including Plutarch (himself a priest at Delphi), Plotinus, and Proclus (also a Greek pagan priest) took as axiomatic that Plato was a divinely inspired religious teacher of a very high order. Again, we are not required to accept these ancient opinions as true, but, their testimony does add incremental evidence in support of the hypothesis that Plato was divinely inspired and communicated an authentic and profound religious message.

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[15] See also e.g., Apuleius *De Platone* 1.1; Olympiodorus *In Alcib* 2.21–24; *Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy* 2.12–16; Origen, *Contra Celsus*, 1.37 & 6.8; Diogenes cites a work attributed to Speusippus, Plato's nephew, as one source).

[16] Diogenes Laertius *Lives* 3.5; Apuleius *De Platone* 1.1; Olympiodorus *In Alcib*. 2.83–86; *Anon. Proleg*. 1.22–29; Origen *Contra Celsus* 6.8 [in the same passage Origen seems to allow that Plato had a prophetic "third eye"]. The swan is sacred to Apollo; cf. *Phaedo* 84e–85b.

[17] When an oracle was consulted about the fate of Plotinus' soul, it was reported that he, along with the souls of Plato and Pythagoras, enjoyed heavenly bliss and communion with Minos, Rhadamanthus and Aeacus (Porphyry, *Vita Plotini* 22).

VISION OF THE GOOD

The Vision of the Good (*Beatific vision*). May we allow that Plato himself experienced, one or more times, a profound vision of the Source of All Good — or God — such as is described in the central section of the *Republic* (6.506d–509c and 7.515e–517c; cf. *Symposium* 211e–212a, *Phaedrus* 247c-e)? It would be odd to suppose otherwise, especially if we believe that the Neoplatonists Plotinus and Porphyry had such experiences, as Porphyry reports (*Vita Plotini* 23; *Enneads* 4.8.1).[18] Though Plato founded no religion *per se,* if he did experience a profound mystical union with God, it might justify at least a qualified comparison of him with religious founders like, if not Jesus Christ and the Buddha, at least St. Paul and others great mystics who have reportedly attained, *Samadhi*, *nirvana*, *satori*, *moksha*, Enlightenment, Cosmic Consciousness, etc.

PLATO'S INFLUENCE

Finally, we have the evidence of the unprecedented unanimous approval granted Plato for over two millennia, and his pervasive positive influence on Western civilization. Once again this is not certain proof, but does *support* the hypothesis that Plato was a *bona fide* religious figure conveying extraordinary knowledge.

Plato's great and wholesome influence on Christianity and Islam must surely be reckoned in any consideration of his religious significance. It is said that Christianity has two parents, Jerusalem and Athens. While it would overstate things to substitute "Plato" for "Athens" here, nevertheless we cannot imagine this being true were it not for Plato's influence on Christianity. This is so not only in terms of the development of theological doctrine, but also in personal spirituality and the Christian contemplative tradition (see, for example, Louth, 1983). Christian theology, ethics, and contemplative practice are saturated with Platonism. Some degree of Platonist and Neoplatonist influence on Sufism could no doubt be shown. Many of the greatest theologians of Christianity were explicitly Platonists: Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandrian, Origen, Ambrose, Augustine, the Cappadocian Fathers, and Maximus Confessor, to name a few.

The Western esoteric tradition also reflects a considerable degree of Platonic and Neoplatonist influence.

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[18] Compare with the Platonic/Plotinian mystical experiences of St. Augustine at Milan (*Confessions* 7.17.23; cf. 7.10.16) and Ostia (9.10.24–25); see O'Donnell, pp. 127–128 for valuable discussion.)

CONCLUSIONS

If Plato transcends modern notions of what a philosopher is, but is understood as also *religious* figure, what are the implications?

Paradigm shift

First, it may produce a paradigm shift in how we *read* Plato and what we try to learn from him. For over a century the dominant academic approach to Plato has been rationalistic and literal. Plato has been seen as an ancient analytical philosopher. This narrow perspective has led to there being only a subset of the themes present within Plato's works being carefully investigated (and even those, partially). It has also produced numerous, sometimes tedious debates amongst specialists, with loss of sight of larger and more important issues.

For instance, a virtually unchallenged tenet of modern scholarship is that Plato, as a contemporary rational philosopher might, underwent gradual changes and development in his basic theories. Corresponding arguments rage over the order in which his works were written. Clearly it is of some interest to consider how Plato's thought developed, but the subject has been carried to inappropriate extremes. Should we arbitrarily rule out the possibility that his leading ideas were inspired or intuited by personal religious experience, perhaps even early in his career? Is it possible Plato was guided by suprarational forms of knowledge, a characteristic attributed to great creative geniuses (Sorokin 1954/2002)? If so, then while his *style* may have undergone gradual changes, we might expect to see his important creative insights present even in his early works, at least in nascent form.

It is especially ironic that a narrow rationalistic approach sometimes verging on scholasticism has dominated academic Platonic studies, given that a hallmark of Plato's *philosophia* is precisely its view that there is a truer and higher level of knowledge than rationalism, namely *noesis*.[19] The rationalist monopoly may, if Plato's significance as a religious figure is accepted, give way to a more authentic and fuller engagement with his works and greater recognition of their scope and depth.

How we read Plato may also change. If Plato is a religious figure, we might not so much seek in his works explicit doctrines, but view them as inspired artistic or even devotional works, which use dialectic, myth, drama, and poetry as springboards to *anamnesis* — the awakening of intuitive insights into our own moral and spiritual nature. In the particular case of the *Republic*, a greater appreciation for Plato's use of allegory to address spiritual and subtle psychological

[19] The l*ocus classicus* for the distinction between *noesis* and ratiocination is, of course, the famous Divided Line of *Republic* (*Rep* 6.509d–6.511e, 7.533c–7.534b; Uebersax, 2013, 2014). Modern scholarship has also tended to discount Plato's own testimony concerning the importance of divine inspiration and *mania* in writing.

issues may eliminate various criticisms of his work made by literal-minded writers unable to see it as anything more than an impractical sketch of an ideal civil state (e.g., Popper, 1945).

Cultural implications

Understanding Plato as a religious figure may also have wider positive cultural implications.

Here we should make an important distinction. To say Plato is a religious figure can be understood in either a *scientific* or a *religious* sense. At a scientific level — for example, if we are concerned with the *history* of religion — we may be interested in how his ideas have influenced and shaped later religious thought; his status as a religious figure would be a scientific *fact* or datum.

But the religious issue is whether we may approach Plato and his message as ourselves believers in things spiritual and supernatural. If there is a God, and if Providence does work in history, might we believe — as some have done in the past — that Plato was in some sense divinely appointed? Examining the complex history of Platonism, as it has periodically emerged and receded in Western history, one may well suspect a plan or design.[20] As if with perfect timing his works arrived in Italy in the 15th century, where, combined with other social and historical developments, they were instrumental in launching the Renaissance. Perhaps there is special significance to a renewed interest in Plato today. Might it signify the advent of a new Renaissance, or in the terms of Pitirim Sorokin's theories of cultural dynamics, a transition from a materialistic to an *Idealistic* culture (Sorokin, 1985; Uebersax, 2010)?

There has been much recent talk about the contemporary social need for a secular spirituality or transcendental humanism. It is widely recognized that the current, dominant materialistic cultural mentality does not adequately reflect humanity's greatest hopes and needs, and is an insufficient foundation for a viable, much less a thriving civil society. Somehow the common spiritual sense of humanity must find expression in our institutions.[21] Yet there are good reasons why any such unifying spiritual and moral framework should not be equated with a particular religious denomination.[22] A Platonism with greater attention to its spiritual dimensions might supply this. Indeed, Platonism has already done so in Europe to a significant degree, infusing society with spiritual values and so influencing culture, philosophy, literature and religion.

One reasonable model might be to see religious Platonism as something like a yogic tradition. Yogic traditions are often distinctly religious, but do not generally contain canonical liturgies,

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[20] Raine (1969, p. 6) compared the Platonic tradition in western culture to "an underground river that from time to time sends up a spring," adding, "wherever its waters flow, the soul is reborn."

[21] Examples are traditional, shared beliefs in an immortal human soul, a Supreme Being, innate moral knowledge and a consequent moral responsibility, etc. Such beliefs have broad implications for human ethics, culture, politics, and education.

[22] This statement is not meant to discount the view that sees Christianity as an enduring and authentic foundation of European culture. Platonism can be understood as supplementing, not superseding Christian culture. On the other hand, because not all of Europe is or has ever has been Christian, Platonism may serve to help unite Christians and non-Christians on important moral issues.

sacraments, institutional authority, or even fixed doctrines — and therefore can be integrated into ones religious life as a Catholic, Protestant, Jew, Muslim, etc. In a similar way Platonism could be understood as a native western form of yoga.[23] But, unlike eastern spiritual disciplines, Platonism has been operating, at more or less obvious levels, within western and European culture for over two millennia. It pervades our literature, art, aesthetics, theories of government, and moral sense. A greater interest in Platonism — especially broadened to include its religious aspects — could serve to produce not only a more human society, but a more *culturally integrated* one.

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[23] An comparison between Platonism and *jnana* (Wisdom) yoga suggests itself, in particular.

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