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## Book Review: Socrates And The Gods: How To Read Plato's Euthyphro Apology And Crito

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apostle Paul's struggle: "For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (Romans 7:15). A deep Augustinian conviction is that we are in bondage to sin, and so not able to trust and love God unless God elects us and gives us the gift of faith, something God does not do for everyone. Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, and many other leading theologians believe sinners are called to faith and love, but are not able to fulfill this calling without selectively given divine help.

This book does what it sets out to do, constructing a fruitful and useful model for Christian thinking. One of the valuable contributions of this book is the way it draws together central claims and insights of "Reformed epistemology" while placing them in a broader theological and intellectual context. Stackhouse uses postmodern sources well, learning from them without accepting the relativism and skepticism so often affirmed by postmodernists. The book synthesizes so many complex issues and sources that it falls short of the more thorough treatment one might want on fewer topics. But it does make many stimulating proposals that will reward further work.

*Socrates and the Gods: How to Read Plato's Euthyphro, Apology, and Crito*, by Nalin Ranasinghe. South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2012. 256 pages. \$28.00 (hardcover).

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Books abound explaining how to read Plato's dialogues. By way of subtitle, Nalin Ranasinghe self-identifies his contribution within this niche. Yet unlike the others, *Socrates and the Gods* says far less than it shows about how to read the dialogues dramatizing Socrates's final weeks. That is, Ranasinghe devotes far less attention to self-conscious reflection on methodology than he does to practicing a method. Therein are bound together the book's central strengths as well as a besetting weakness.

Ranasinghe's interpretive method defies easy characterization. Partly this is due to the "proudly autochthonous" quality of the book (2). Further complicating matters is his "seemingly cavalier disregard of three and twenty centuries" of scholarship concerning the *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, and *Crito* (2). But even apart from these idiosyncracies, he simply fails to indicate straightforwardly his methodological commitments, an omission reflecting a pervasive rhetorical style given to enthymematic argument. In consequence, readers must work hard to identify his hermeneutic, his conclusions, and his reasons for them. While these deficits constitute frustrating liabilities for a "how to" book, no less is it the case that Ranasinghe's

interpretations of classical Greek epic, drama, philosophy, politics, and religion are generative and illuminating. It turns out that there is a plausible *methodos* to his peculiar *mania*, so that he says well, "Any merits that this eccentric work may possess accrue from its fanatical loyalty to Socrates and Plato" (2).

Generally speaking, Ranasinghe reads classical texts with attention to (1) historical-cultural context, (2) dramatic plot, (3) typological significance, and (4) philosophical and psychological insight. Whether discussing Homer, Aeschylus, Plato, or Xenophon, Ranasinghe demonstrates literary-critical acumen and interpretive generosity. Regarding the three Platonic dialogues he treats, he operates with at least four additional hermeneutical principles. First, the *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, and *Crito* comprise a dramatically consistent *oeuvre*. They form an "essential literary unity" (3) and convey a "tragic-comic theme unifying and animating the three dialogues in question" (201). Second, whatever the historicity of Euthyphro, Meletus, and Crito, Plato's dramatization of the men matters more their history. Ranasinghe argues that the etymological significance of the three names dovetails so neatly with the thematic emphases of the dialogues that we ought to regard them as "more fictional than real" (16). The character Euthyphro, whose name suggests "straight thinking" or "direct knowledge," is a Homeric theological literalist who claims immediate apprehension of the divine, but Socrates demonstrates his failures on both counts. Meletus, Socrates's accuser in the *Apology*, "whose very name means 'care' . . . couldn't care less whether Socrates was actually atheist, agnostic or heretic" (83–84). And Crito's name suggests "discernment or judging" (175). Yet "just as Meletus failed to care and Euthyphro's eponymous literalism was utterly inadequate to the task of understanding the divine, Crito proves to lack the very quality that his name denotes" (176). Third, Ranasinghe precisely identifies the most powerful interpretive fulcrum within the dialogues: "the self-revelation of the interlocutor(s) . . . is the key to deciphering the secrets of the text" (179). By describing an interlocutor's true character—a task entailing considerations of cultural context, dramatic plot structure, and rhetorical criticism as much as philosophical analysis—one can "discover a dialogue's concealed but ever-suggestive *phusis*" (191). Finally, Ranasinghe adopts the *Republic* as a Platonic "proof text" (226) for his interpretive judgments. Why the *Republic* deserves the definitive status he assigns it goes unaddressed. That said, if Ranasinghe rightly holds that Plato's dialogues unfold "in a perfected cosmos micro-managed by its imperfect creator—a place where accidents never occur and every detail has meaning" (17), then it follows that every reading of any particular Platonic dialogue is susceptible to interpretive correction from all of the other dialogues. And if that is so, since the *Republic* has the advantages of length and familiarity, it is perhaps a "best case" test case. Of course the larger point, the one elevating Plato's work to something akin to the Bible as understood by Christians with a plenary and verbal

theory of divine inspiration, is arguable, to put it mildly, notwithstanding Alan Bloom's popularization of the view.

Substantively, the book foregrounds the oft-neglected subject of political theology. On Ranasinghe's reading, the three dialogues highlight different aspects of fifth- and fourth-century Athenians' understanding of the gods and the concomitant politics associated with those understandings. Because the "vitality of the religious tradition . . . [had] broken down . . . the war-chastened Athenians were no longer conscious of dwelling in a god-hallowed cosmos" (41). Into this theologically and politically disenchanting space, Plato's dialogues enter.

The *Euthyphro* and *Apology* present their antagonists in superficially similar dramatic circumstances: Euthyphro and Meletus are both prosecuting older men for impiety. Their theological and political interests, however, radically diverge. Euthyphro's literalism blithely accepts "the hoary old myths as exact factual accounts of the history of Olympus" (36) without caring at all about hermetical issues, crass anthropomorphism, or moral inconsistency. Socrates enjoys no evident success in shaking Euthyphro's "fundamentalist" tendencies. Perhaps this is because, since soothsayers like him have ostensibly unmediated access to the divine, Euthyphro revels in the presumed supremacy of priestly direction in political matters. His fundamentalism is motivated, one might say. Meletus, by contrast, demonstrates no apparent interest in philosophical or theological reflection; Socrates's cross-examination in the *Apology* shows him up as a fool where knowledge of the divine is concerned. Yet Meletus cares a great deal about politics, and he's no fool about the advantages of traditional religion when it comes to preserving entrenched political interests. Socrates's alleged impiety matters to Meletus just insofar as it is connected to his alleged corruption of the youth, a "corruption" that threatens to overturn the city's status quo. On Ranasinghe's reading, religious Euthyphro succumbs to hubris and political Meletus falls prey to premeditated hypocrisy. Both serve their own advantage and neither gives way to Socrates's philosophically enlightened political theology. Ranasinghe writes:

Through his inspired oracles and wise exegeses, Euthyphro offers to re-create meaning in a god-impooverished world. He is unwilling to acknowledge the far weaker pragmatic effective position of Meletus that telling stories about the gods and performing public sacrifices revives and unifies the polity. If either Meletus or Euthyphro is correct, politics and revelation cannot exist together. It is Socrates who will tacitly suggest a manner in which mankind's sacred and secular obligations . . . may be reconciled to each other by a gift of the gods: the Hermes-given faculty of judgment. (42)

At this point Ranasinghe's interpretive methodology begins to pay off. At the heart of Socratic theology, he maintains, is an answer to the question posed at *Euthyphro* 10a: "Is that which is holy loved by the gods because it is holy, or is it holy because it is loved by the gods?" The reasonable Socratic answer—the historically, dramatically, and philosophically

fitting answer—embraces the first disjunct. Socratic theology accepts the view that the gods discover and serve what is holy. And if holiness is a cosmic reality, not a crude voluntaristic creation, then it and its moral concomitants may be both rationally examined and erotically pursued. We possess, at least potentially, the power of judgment whereby we may see, desire, seek, revere, and finally embrace what is holy. Socrates's theology thus avoids Euthyphro's naive acceptance of the Homeric and Hesiodic myths, unquestioning promulgation of dubious morals, and obfuscation before rational challenge. It likewise resists Meletus's carelessness about divine matters, for Socrates takes belief in the gods, the excellence of one's soul, and the longing for holiness as preeminently important, rather than as merely politically useful desiderata convenient for sustaining public order and civic life. Socrates's theology thus overcomes "the divisive totems of fundamentalism and the moral chaos born of liberal positivism" and "points towards the possibility of a universal religion—one based on the idea of Goodness, the practice of virtue, and the finding of grace and beauty in the cosmos" (51).

The *Crito*, Ranasinghe argues, fits on the far side of the *Apology* in the same way the *Euthyphro* fits on the near side. Both explore the implied arguments underlying Socrates's actions in the *Apology*; the former addresses his theology, the latter his politics. Ranasinghe proposes:

[J]ust as the *Euthyphro* defends the "goodness" of the strange gods he is accused of exposing the young to, the *Crito* suggests how the corruption of their fathers could be redeemed. While the *Euthyphro* explains how the polity is corrupted by a bad connection between the divine and human, and the *Apology* reveals some of the sacred powers impeding the prospect of transcendence, the *Crito* subtly indicates what a Socratic political solution to these moral and political problems would look like. (175)

*Crito*, although among Socrates's closest personal friends, fails to judge well. Mired in self-preoccupation, he beleaguers Socrates, pressing him with concerns about public reputation, family honor, money, and the like, and he fails to take seriously enough the philosophical convictions which guide Socrates's practices and actions. As shown in both the *Crito* and the *Euthydemus*, *Crito* is "sensitive to the contagion of shame" and echoes "the opinions expressed by men for whose opinions he has no small regard, even though he knows them to be ignorant" (192). Yet Socrates does not lose patience with or show contempt for *Crito*. He rather exemplifies true friendship and politics alike, which are characterized by "good men who help bring out the best in each other, rather than being only about preserving the comfortable and private in a world gone mad" (196). In the face of death, Socrates's political practice—his soulcraft and statecraft—coheres with his theology; his philosophically tested political theology shows *Crito*, and all who would exercise rational judgment, a better way.

*Socrates and the Gods* possesses many merits. It is above all a fecund book, brimming with potential. Virtually every page contains suggestive avenues of inquiry, comparison, and contrast. For instance, Ranasinghe's

treatment of Socrates as a new kind of hero to which Achilles and Odysseus serve as foils is beautifully executed and rewarding to read. Similarly, his exploration of the polyvalent significance of Crito arriving to find Socrates asleep is meritorious. The book's fecundity, however, frequently is like an overflowing cornucopia; too often missing is a measured, deliberative, and dare I say scholarly enjoyment of the bounty. Another excellence consists in the book's occasional references to contemporary circumstances: "Socrates's feat is of no little significance in our own day" (219). Ranasinghe is certainly correct. Yet here, he takes regrettable recourse in glib labels and drive-by diagnoses—"postmodern man," the "deified market," "religious anti-humanism," and "atheistic science" are cavalierly bandied about where critical precision, sobriety of judgment, and provocative argument are necessary.

The book's rhetorical qualities matter less than its methodology and substance, yet I must add a few comments about style. *Socrates and the Gods* would have benefited from a strong editorial hand. Clearer initial statements of argument and periodic rehearsals of arguments are needed. Simple divisions and subheadings within the chapters are lacking. Truncation of undisciplined prose would help. Perhaps most all, much refinement is needed of the untold allusions found in the book. Classical allusions to Homer, fifth-century tragedians, and philosophical texts are fine and useful. Shakespearean turns of phrase are occasionally decorous, if self-indulgent. But Abraham Lincoln ("fool some of the people all of the time"), Dale Carnegie ("win friends and influence people"), and John Gillespie Magee ("escape the surly bonds of earth")? The book's anachronistic allusions quickly become wearily trite. More bothersome are periodic Christian allusions which too conveniently assimilate Socrates to Christ.

Plainly, *Socrates and the Gods* is too autochthonous to displace standard scholarly treatments of the *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, and *Crito*. Yet because Ranasinghe idiosyncratically neglects the scholarly literature, he has a free hand to develop a novel, perceptive, and striking interpretation. Thus is it that, despite real limits, *Socrates and the Gods* can offer great gifts to dialectically engaged readers.

*Evolutionary Religion*, by J. L. Schellenberg. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. 174 pages. \$29.95 (paperback).

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Either some form of traditional religion or no religion at all—these seem to be the only two alternatives on offer today. But maybe this impression is