Piety, Impiety, and the Advent of Written Prose:

Plato’s *Phaedrus* and Isocrates’ *Busiris*

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Abstract

Pre-classical Greek polytheism, in practice and in poetry, promotes the idea that religion itself is inconsistent. Piety to one deity comes into conflict with piety to another, symbolizing a chaotic and challenging human condition. The late fifth and fourth centuries BCE, however, saw the advent of written prose speeches and dialogues and, at the same time, a movement toward a more transcendent and unified view of religion. Are these two trends related?

Through an intertextual, close rhetorical study of Plato’s *Phaedrus* and Isocrates’ *Busiris*, I argue that they are. The advent of circulated prose documents exposed inconsistencies native to polytheism to scrutiny from rival philosophers in the context of a litigious Athenian culture that had already executed Socrates on charges of impiety. This prompted an allegorical debate between Plato and Isocrates about the value of written communication that had its crux in contention over the definition of piety. Both of these influential writers’ attempts to find an intellectual high ground in the debate contribute to a trend toward a more transcendent and unified religion in ancient Athens. A few centuries later, the Graeco-Roman world would adopt the thorough transcendence and unity of monotheism.

While one would not want to draw too strong an analogy with our own context, this study serves as a reminder that new forms of dissemination can expose religious discourse to cultural forces that demand response. The response can change religion significantly, creating new religious paradigms and undermining older traditions.
In the context of our present media revolution, there is a tendency, among political commentators who appropriate religious language, among scholars studying religion, and among religious communities themselves, to view the new media in a utilitarian way. A political blogger can provide real-time, fragmented commentary of a political speech as it takes place, available to everyone in streaming video. A scholar can publish articles about religion in an online journal that will be viewed by hundreds of people browsing the web. A church can webcast its worship service to thousands who would never come to the church in person, and who may hold contrasting religious views. In all of these cases, the messages are more widely disseminated and can provoke a more immediate and widespread reaction among more diverse audiences than would have been the case even a few decades ago. Back then, the blogger would have been a newspaper columnist, read the next day without opportunity for response beyond writing a letter to the editor. The scholar would have been writing only to a few other scholars who sought out the journal in a library. The preacher would have been “preaching to the choir.”

An important question is whether the more widely disseminated messages and more diverse audiences cause us to self-censor or change our messages in any significant way. If so, what kind of effect is that having on religion itself? Does theology change, over time, in response to these forces, and can a tradition lose its edge, its primary message?

I argue that this can and does happen. My intent today is to provide an example of how the social pressures generated by a new medium: written prose documents, influenced the theology of two influential writers who lived in Athens, Greece at the time of the world’s first democratic government. These writers, Plato, and Isocrates, then contribute the revised theology to later Greek and Roman thought, up through the conversion to Judeo-Christian monotheism. Of course, I do not wish to draw too strong an analogy with our current media revolution, but I hope that this serves to at least alert
us to the possibility that the self-censorship that accompanies new media might be influencing contemporary theology for better or for worse.

In classical Greek writings, we see two trends that occur together. On one hand, there is a media revolution as profound as the one we are experiencing now, moving away from a primarily oral culture that remembers its stories and myths in the form of poetic verse, to a textual culture that increasingly moves away from poetry and toward prose (Walker 2000). At the same time, there is a theological movement away from the kind of polytheism we see in the time of Homer, that is about 600 BCE, where the gods and goddesses represent human impulses and motives that are often in conflict, to a much more unified and transcendent view of divinity, one that culminates in the adoption of Judeo-Christian monotheism in the first few centuries CE. This later trend emerges first with early Greek philosophers who were interested in finding a rational, unifying philosophy, but who did not separate theology and philosophy (Jaeger 1947). But are these two trends connected? Did the adoption of prose encourage a more unified and transcendent kind of theology? I argue that these two trends are closely related.

Rather than surveying the long histories of writing and theology in ancient Greece, however, I plan to make my case by examining two texts from 4th century BCE: a time in which these two trends were more or less crystallized in the writings of influential teachers. Classicist H. I. Marrou identifies Plato and Isocrates as the two classical “masters” who became the foundational thinkers of later Hellenistic education and culture (Marrou 1956). Their writings and educational programs became, along with Roman influences, the intellectual basis for the later culture in which the New Testament was written, and in which Greeks first began to convert to Christianity. Plato and Isocrates were neither the beginning nor the ending of the two trends I just mentioned, but they represent a significant moment for their popularization and transmission.

By closely examining Plato’s *Phaedrus*, and Isocrates’ *Busiris*, I argue that these two writers engage in an allegorical debate over the value of prose writing, in which the
two thinkers’ each attempt to find a more transcendent theology that will enable them to avoid accusations of impiety while accusing each other of impiety in subtle, allegorical ways. Plato produces his famous “Theory of the Forms” while Isocrates adopts a version of traditional Greek polytheism in which the gods do not come into disagreement or conflict. To make this case, however, I will first need to describe the earlier Greek polytheistic theology that Plato and Isocrates work against.

In 2009, I was co-taught a course on Greek rhetoric and the New Testament to Memphis Theological Seminary students on a travel-study program in Greece. While we were in Greece, one of the students commented on the ancient Greek myths: “They sound like a big soap opera.” That is exactly right. The gods and goddesses hold grudges, display jealousy, fight each other, have love affairs, commit adultery, play favorites with mortal humans, and all kind of things that seem rather ungodlike in our culture, which is heavily influenced by Judeo-Christian traditions. The ancient myths seem to us like another edition of “Survivor”. Who will get kicked off of Mt. Olympus this week? What we miss is that each of the gods and goddesses represents certain pulls on human life. That they contend with each other signifies that the pulls and motives in our lives often come into conflict.

We know this situation well. If you work late every night you might get ahead at work, but your family life will suffer. If you commit to be there for your family, you might get passed over for a promotion. If you see yourself as a great lover and pursue a life of being “in love”, you will never settle down and have a family, and your work might suffer because you are always twitterpated. On the other hand, a family person or a career person has commitments that might make the adventurous love life impossible. To put this more in the context of ancient Greece, if you are primarily a farmer, you will not be a very good soldier, though you could still be conscripted. If you are a professional soldier, well there are obviously certain hazards and sacrifices that go with that work. Anyway, this is along the lines of what the ancient myths communicate. You can not
please all the gods all the time, and piety to one god comes into conflict with piety to another. This points to a very challenging human condition in the ancient Greek religion.

Take the story of the Judgment of Paris from the Homeric cycle. Paris, a mortal, has to judge a beauty contest between three goddesses: Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite. Each goddess offers him a bribe: Athena will make him a war hero, Hera will make him King of Asia Minor, Aphrodite will give him the most beautiful woman in the world: Helen of Sparta. Paris chooses Aphrodite and takes Helen back with him to Troy, but Hera and Athena are so offended that they lead the Greeks to attack Troy, thus beginning the Trojan War. According to the old Homeric theology, Paris was doomed. No matter which goddess he chose he was going to offend two other goddesses. That speaks, again, of a rather bleak human condition.

These stories from earlier epic poetry persisted as the educational canon through the time of Isocrates and Plato (Marrou 1956). However, impiety was now a capital offense in Athens. Plato’s teacher Socrates was executed by hemlock on charges of impiety to the gods and corrupting the youth. Plato and, probably, Isocrates had both known Socrates personally, and this event looms over the writings of both intellectuals. They inherited a theology that says you can not be pious to all the gods all the time, in the context of a legal system that says if you are impious to a god, you can be executed.

Now throw prose writing into the mix. Isocrates wrote political pamphlets in prose that were distributed to be read (Too 1995). I call them pamphlets for this reason, but they take the form of speeches. They were just never delivered orally by Isocrates himself—he actually had a terrible fear of public speaking. By distributing speeches exclusively in written form, Isocrates could be considered one of the “early adopters” of prose writing for political purposes. He would have been the ancient Greek version of a political blogger just a few years ago, when only a few people were blogging.

I have to stop here and acknowledge that, on an explicit level, Plato and Isocrates do not contend with each other in their writings. In the whole Isocratean corpus, which
fills three volumes of the Loeb Classical Library, Isocrates does not once name Plato or any of the other Socratics by name. Likewise, in the entire Platonic corpus, which is much larger even than the Isocratean corpus, Plato only names Isocrates once, and that appears on the surface to be a passing reference at the conclusion of this dialogue: the *Phaedrus*. Therefore, any intertextuality between Plato and Isocrates is allegorical or implied. A number of modern interpreters have argued that intertextual relationships exist between Plato and Isocrates, but this is not universally accepted in the disciplines of classics, philosophy, and rhetoric.

One of my mentors, Brad McAdon of the University of Memphis, is among those who argue that such a relationship does exist between Platonic dialogues and Isocratean texts. Specifically, McAdon has argued that *Phaedrus* contends with *Against the Sophists* over the definition of philosophy, and that Isocrates’ later pamphlet *Antidosis*, in turn, responds to *Phaedrus* (McAdon 2004). I will not reproduce McAdon’s entire argument here, however, I would highlight a few things that he points out.

The first is that Plato, through the character Socrates, all but admits that he disguises the identity of the person he is disputing by using other names. In the dialogue, Phaedrus asks Socrates if he is really talking about Gorgias when he mentions Nestor, Thrasymachus, or Palamedes, and Socrates admits that he might be doing so (*Phaedrus* 261c). Gorgias is Isocrates’ teacher, and Plato also wrote a dialogue by that name, which was also, probably, aimed at Isocrates’ educational program. This could certainly imply that Plato is really aiming this dialogue at Isocrates.

But why would he attack Isocrates in allegory? An answer to this question comes, I argue, from Isocrates’ *Busiris*, which, I shall argue, responds to the *Phaedrus*. During a discussion about the impiety of the poets, which echoes a theme from *Phaedrus*, Isocrates makes the puzzling statement, “…nor while passing laws for the punishment of libels against each other, shall we disregard loose-tongued vilification of the gods”
(Busiris 40). I will get to that idea of impiety momentarily. For now, let it suffice to say that Plato and Isocrates must refer to each other in allegory in order to keep each other from suing for libel.

Another insight from McAdon that I would highlight is that Plato’s dialogue offers a critique of writing that echoes an earlier work by Alcidamas that was clearly aimed at Isocrates. Socrates tells an Egyptian myth about the invention of writing, which attributes writing to the god Theuth (Phaedrus 274c), who claims that his invention “is an elixir of memory and wisdom.” The Egyptian king Thamus then replies saying, “This invention will produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn to use it, because they will not practice their memory.” He goes on to say, “You have invented an elixir, not of memory, but of reminding; and you offer your pupils the appearance of wisdom, not true wisdom, for they will read many things without instruction, and will therefore seem to know many things, when they are for the most part ignorant and hard to get along with, since they are not wise, but only appear wise.”

I want to point out that it is not just a critique of writing, but of prose writing in particular. In the days of the oral culture, minstrels would commit to memory long epic poems such as the Iliad and the Odyssey. Teachers would require their students to memorize sections as well, and thus Plato refers to Homer as the “educator of Greece” (Jaeger 1947). Learning them in poetic verse with meter and rhyme made them easier to remember. The earliest written texts in Greece were also poetry: the oral traditions written down. However, having texts written down meant they no longer had to be memorized, and if they do not have to be memorized, they do not have to be poetic.

Plato is suggesting here that so much prose writing is undermining Greek education, in which people learn the cultural stories by memorizing poetry. Not that Plato is conservatively arguing for a return to that curriculum. For Plato, real wisdom comes from dialectic (Phaedrus 267e).
Plato goes on to argue that a written text can not respond to questions or criticism. “It just goes on saying the same thing forever” he says (275d). However, Plato’s concern is about the best way to teach philosophy. Plato writes dialogues in which the characters engage and respond to each other, and this is supposed to help discover truth. Of course, Socrates always wins in these dialogues, and the various other characters often represent real rivals such as Isocrates.

Interestingly, in this same dialogue where Plato attacks Isocrates for using written, prose speeches for his teaching, he also accuses Isocrates of impiety. Of course, this is well-disguised allegorically in order to avoid a lawsuit, and it also responds to an earlier Isocratean pamphlet called Helen, after Helen of Troy.

In that speech, Isocrates uses an ironic twist on the story of the Judgement of Paris, to which I referred earlier, in order to argue allegorically that rhetoric can be made “pleasing” to politicians, appealing to their appetites for money and pleasure, without encouraging them to act in a way that is contrary to the public good. To accomplish this, one encourages politicians to pursue that which will bring them honor, so that the people will think well of them, rather than inevitably pursuing that which will bring them riches or pleasure. The politicians then receive riches and pleasure as a result of being honored.

In terms of the myth about Paris, the three goddesses represent these motives: Athena is honor: she offers Paris the chance to be a war hero; Hera is gain or riches: she offers him rule over Asia Minor; and Aphrodite is pleasure: she offers him Helen. The ironic twist in the text is that Isocrates makes Paris’ choice of Aphrodite’ an act motivated by honor rather than pleasure because, he says, if the three goddesses were all pursuing the prize of beauty, then choosing the beauty of Helen affirms their choice, thus honoring all three goddesses (Helen 43).

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1 This understanding of Isocrates’ ethic originates with T. Poulakos (1997). Allegorical interpretation of Helen along these lines is mine.
Notice the more unified theology at work here. Instead of representing the goddesses as coming into conflict, Isocrates brings the goddesses into a kind of agreement, and this makes Paris’ choice an act of piety to all three goddesses. He has taken a story that is, in its original form, primarily about the idea that piety to one deity comes into conflict with piety to another, and erases that meaning. Also in the Helen, Isocrates relates a story about the poet Stesichorus, who had written a poem that portrays Helen as going willingly to Troy with Paris. Helen, who had been made into a goddess, struck Stesichorus blind for the impiety, and restored his sight only after Stesichorus composed a retraction (64). The implication here is that the gods and goddesses only pursue honor, which is why choosing the prize of beauty, in Helen, was the honorable thing for Paris to do. So much for the soap opera theology of Homer!

Plato turns the ethic of pursuing honor against Isocrates in the Phaedrus, accusing him of impiety. The pretext for Plato’s dialogue is that Phaedrus and Socrates are discussing a written speech by the orator Lysias. Of course, it is a written speech and Phaedrus is carrying a copy. I should note also that the speech by Lysias, which is read aloud by Phaedrus, is written in the style of Isocrates in terms of rhythm and sentence structure, and this has been confirmed by computer analysis (Nails 1995). The Lysias speech argues that one should prefer the romantic advances of someone who does not love them to the advances of someone who is in love with them. This resonates with, and I think mocks, the “honorable” and not pleasure-seeking motive Isocrates attributes to Paris in the Helen. Also, like in the Helen, there is a reference to the story of Stesichorus (Phaedrus 243a), which also suggests an intertextual relationship between the two speeches.

A little later in the Phaedrus, Socrates offers a corrective speech, where he will set Lysias right. Socrates suggests that the Lysias speech, which mocks the Helen, is impious to the god Eros, a god that represents “love” in the sense of longing (242e). This is where Plato, subtly, accuses Isocrates of impiety.
Socrates: “Phaedrus, a dreadful speech it was, a dreadful speech, the one you brought with you, and the one you made me speak.”
Phaedrus: “How so?”
Socrates: It was foolish, and somewhat impious. What could be more dreadful than that?”
Phaedrus: “Nothing, if you are right about it.”
Socrates: “Well, do you not believe that Love (Eros) is the son of Aphrodite and a god?”
Phaedrus: “So it is.” (Phaedrus 242d)

Eros is the son of Aphrodite. The “longing” represented by Eros is, according to Plato, actually a longing to glimpse the truth that the gods and philosophers can behold. Longing for a mortal lover is only a bad copy of this pure form of longing. It is here, in Socrates’ corrective speech, that Plato refers to his Theory of Forms. People and gods, he says, seek this pure form of truth. However, the gods are not encumbered by selfish human motives and can more easily glimpse the truth. Mortals, on the other hand, must overcome selfish motives to see the truth (247b).

Note the theology here. The gods still represent all the human motives they did in Homeric tradition. However, Plato describes a unified and transcendent truth, almost in a monotheistic way. The gods are only witness to this truth, almost in the way angels would behold the Judeo-Christian God. In this way Plato, like Isocrates, promotes a theology that moves away from the older Homeric conceptions and toward something that is more recognizable to us. The soap opera is potentially still present, but it is no longer the ultimate reality. Plato also clearly responds to Isocrates’ ethic by suggesting that an appeal to one’s desire to be honored is still an appeal to a selfish motive.

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2 Plato argues this allegorically, making use the metaphor of a chariot team.
In this corrective speech, Plato suggests that someone who is trained to pursue honor, as Isocrates recommends in the *Helen*, will not be able to resist the desire for pleasure “when drunk or in some other moment of carelessness” (*Phaedrus* 256B). As we have seen, Isocrates does allegorically suggest that pursuing honor results in pleasure and gain as well. Plato points out that, no matter which self-interested motive one pursues: pleasure, gain, or honor, it is still a selfish motive that gets in the way of true philosophy and the pursuit of truth. In making this case, Plato even uses the same two virtues: *sophrosune* or “prudence” and *dikaiosune* or “justice” that Isocrates, in other pamphlets, recommends as constraining pursuit of pleasure and gain. Plato says that even these virtues are “earthly copies” of true virtue and will not enable a glimpse of the pure forms (250b). Only philosophy, as Plato defines it, can do that.

All of this precedes Plato’s attack on prose writing in the myth of Theuth (274c), and the arrangement of the *Phaedrus* implies that they are referring to the written speech by Lysias, which I have argued represents the *Helen*. This suggests that Isocrates can not defend his piety in response to Plato’s critique because the *Helen* is already distributed widely, and it goes on suggesting that longing for pleasure is bad, when that kind of longing is actually a piety to Eros and the drive to seek truth. The *Helen* is not able to respond to Plato because it is not dialectic (276e), which, presumably, asks all the hard questions in the course of a dialogue.

Plato ends the dialogue with his only direct reference to Isocrates, which is a back-handed compliment (McAdon 2004). “Isocrates is young,” Socrates says, “but there is something of the philosopher in him” (*Phaedrus* 279b). Of course, Socrates was older than Isocrates, and Plato puts these words in his mouth, but Plato himself is actually younger than Isocrates, and by ancient Greek protocol, this would be a bit disrespectful.

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3 Isocrates elaborates on these virtues at *Nicocles* 31 (*dikaiosune*) and 36 (*sophrosune*).
Isocrates does have a response to the *Phaedrus*, however. McAdon sees in Isocrates’ *Antidosis* a response to a discussion about the definition of philosophy in the *Phaedrus*. I see a response to the discussions about piety, which are quite theological, and also the discussion about writing, in the *Busiris*. I have to admit, though, that my argument calls for a significant re-dating of that Isocratean text relative to the *Phaedrus*.

*Busiris* is generally thought to have been written between 390 and 385 BCE, and *Busiris* is generally thought to be a display piece for the purpose of attracting new students when Isocrates first began teaching (Livingstone 2001). The *Phaedrus* is generally thought to have been written between 360 and 355 BCE, a good 30 years after the *Busiris*, though a few have argued for a much earlier *Phaedrus* (Tomin 1988).

Space will not allow me to provide my complete argument for redating the *Busiris*. Briefly, I would mention that Isocrates says in one of his last pamphlets, the *Panathenaicus*, that he did not use myths in his pamphlets when he was first starting out, and *Busiris* is filled with mythic materials.

I would also note that, if *Busiris* is read as an allegorical piece aimed at Plato, there is a reference to Phytagoras (*Busiris* 28), which hints at Plato’s trip to Sicily, from which he returned in 387 BCE, and also to the curriculum of Plato’s Academy (23), founded in 387 BCE, a reference to the division of labor (15) in Book II of Plato’s *Republic*, written between 380 and 360 BCE. Regardless of whether the *Phaedrus* is much earlier than is generally thought or if the *Busiris* is much later, I do think that the *Phaedrus* was written first and that the *Busiris* is written in response.

*Busiris* is ostensibly addressed to Polycrates, who is generally thought to have been an Athenian sophist. The Greek introduction to *Busiris* is the source for this. However, I would suggest that Isocrates is really referring to Plato when he says “Polycrates,” in the way that Plato is often referring to Isocrates when he says “Gorgias” or “Lysias,” and that he does this for the same reason: to avoid a libel suit.
If Isocrates does intend to parody Plato here, I would point out that the name “Polycrates” serves this purpose well. The name, which means “rule by many” could be seen as an antithesis to “Isocrates” which means “self-rule.” In the context of the discussion, self-rule hints at the virtues that constrain self-interested motives, while “rule by many” might imply that the motives can be easily manipulated by others. So, “Polycrates” is an ideal name for Isocrates to use to parody someone. “Polycrates” also, of course, begins with the letter pi, like “Plato.” If indeed the *Busiris* is a polemic against and parody of Plato, Isocrates could hardly have chosen a more appropriate name to address.

In a speech where Isocrates will praise Busiris, who is a mythical villain king of Egypt, there is a sense of irony, even of proclaiming that which is opposite to reality. The very first sentence refers to a great “reversal” in Polycrates’ life (*Busiris* 1). Furthermore, irony is expressed in the antithetical name “Polycrates,” and also in the speeches Polycrates has written. His speeches include the defense of Busiris that Isocrates is ostensibly correcting, and also a prosecution of Socrates. Isocrates accuses Polycrates of writing a treatise that effectively condemns Busiris and one that effectively exonerates Socrates (4). Yet, if Isocrates is being ironic even here, then one might suspect that the person Isocrates is addressing has written an apology for Socrates that fails to exonerate, and even further incriminates him. It would not be too difficult to see a reference Plato’s *Apology* in such a statement.

Furthermore, at the very end of *Busiris*, Isocrates apologizes for instructing Polycrates, even though Polycrates is older than him, in what could well be a tongue-in-cheek reference to Plato’s reference to Isocrates’ age at the end of the *Phaedrus*.

Do not be astonished if I, who am younger than you and unrelated to you, essay so lightly to admonish you; for, in my opinion, giving good counsel on such subjects is not the function of older men or of the most intimate
friends, but of those who know most and desire most to render service 

(*Busiris* 50).

More interesting than the ending, however, is that in the very beginning of the letter, Isocrates responds to Plato’s critique of writing in the *Phaedrus*. “..having read certain of the discourses which you have written” Isocrates writes, “I should have been greatly pleased to discuss frankly with you and fully the education with which you have been obliged to occupy yourself” (1). In other words, “You want answers about the *Helen*? Do not just keep reading the speech. Ask me! Let’s have that conversation.” A little later he goes on, “Since we have not met each other, we shall be able, if we ever do come together, to discuss the other topics at greater length; concerning those suggestions, however, by which at the present time I might be of service to you, I have thought I should advise you by letter, though concealing my views, to the best of my ability, from everyone else” (3).

Here is a suggestion about some of the advantages of writing. First, writing can serve as a conversation starter, just as the Lysias speech sparked the conversation in the *Phaedrus*. Second, although Plato and Isocrates most certainly had met each other, the fiction of Polycrates allows Isocrates to say that they have not, which helps to preserve the fiction, and which also highlights an important advantage of writing: it enables communication at a distance. The mention of concealing views from third parties could refer to Plato’s response to *Against the Sophists*, which was probably aimed at Alcidamas.

Isocrates goes on, “I am well aware, however, that it is instinctive with most persons when admonished, not to look to the benefits they receive but, on the contrary, to listen to what is said with the greater displeasure in proportion to the rigour with which their critic passes their faults in review” (3). Here Isocrates might be suggesting that Plato did not like what Isocrates had to say in the *Helen*, especially about pursuing pleasure and gain.
Notice here that Isocrates is pointing toward a kind of dialectic. In this case, it is a real dialectic that takes place in both textual and oral discussion. The suggestion here is that Plato’s response to *Helen* and *Against the Sophists* indicates that Isocrates’ pamphlets did serve a dialectical purpose: they forced Plato to do some thinking and they prompted a response. The *Phaedrus*, then, continues a real conversation on an intertextual level that transcends the artificial and, ultimately, one-sided conversation that takes place within Plato’s dialogues. Isocrates thus vindicates prose writing from Plato’s critique in the story about Theuth.

And now, Isocrates will provide his own story about Egypt, or rather, a mythical and diabolical Egyptian king named “Busiris.” I will not recount the entire speech here, but I want to emphasize that the *Busiris* comes to a climax with a section praising the piety of the Egyptians. Isocrates writes: “For all persons who have so bedizened themselves as to create the impression that they possess greater wisdom, or some other excellence, than they can rightly claim, certainly do harm to their dupes; but those persons who have so championed the cause of religion that divine rewards and punishments are made to appear more certain than they prove to be, such men, I say, benefit in the greatest measure the lives of men” (*Busiris* 24).

Implied here is that Plato is creating the impression that he possesses greater wisdom than he actually does by suggesting that his philosophy is the vehicle by which one can encounter pure, abstract truth. Suggested here is that Plato is actually doing harm to his students because, one might suppose, Plato’s philosophy demotes the gods to a place outside of the pure forms. Piety, then, becomes a secondary concern to the pursuit of truth. Isocrates does not refer to the theory of forms directly, probably because of the possibility of a libel suit. He must maintain the fiction that this is aimed at Polycrates. Nevertheless, Isocrates equates truth with piety to the gods, an equation that is missing in Plato’s theory of forms. In doing so, he accuses Plato of impiety, comparing him to the Homeric poets and even hinting, once again, at Stesichorus with a reference to blindness.
But the fact is that you had no regard for the truth; on the contrary, you followed the calumnies of the poets” Isocrates writes. “Aye, the poets have related about the gods themselves tales more outrageous than anyone would dare tell concerning their enemies. For not only have they imputed to them thefts and adulteries, and vassalage among men, but they have fabricated tales of the eating of children, the castrations of fathers, the fetterings of mothers, and many other crimes. For these blasphemies the poets, it is true, did not pay the penalty they deserved, but assuredly they did not escape punishment altogether: some became vagabonds begging for their daily bread; others became blind; another spent all his life in exile from his fatherland and in warring with his kinsmen; and Orpheus, who made a point of rehearsing these tales, died by being torn asunder.

Therefore if we are wise we shall not imitate their tales, nor while passing laws for the punishment of libels against each other, shall we disregard loose-tongued vilification of the gods; on the contrary, we shall be on our guard and consider equally guilty the impiety of those who recite and those who believe such lies (Busiris 38-40).

So what do we take away from all this? I mean, so what if arguments about the value of prose writing were taking place in these same texts where Plato and Isocrates sought out theologies more transcendent than the older polytheism, and where Plato and Isocrates accuse each other of impiety? I suggest that these arguments appear in the same texts because it was precisely the permanent nature of prose writing, and its potential to be misinterpreted or twisted in meaning, that forced these two thinkers to seek out more unified and transcendent theologies in order to protect themselves from charges of impiety, and to find an intellectual high ground from which to accuse each other. Ironically, in doing so, they enact a kind of soap opera of their own, that would rank right up there with anything Homeric tradition says about the Olympian gods.
This poses a question worth asking. As the people who generate theology today, and by this I mean anyone who makes use of religious topics in public or religious discourse, publish their rhetoric via electronic media that open themselves to many audiences, do they fear that someone out there will misinterpret them or accuse them of impiety? Do they self-censor what they say because of this? Do they go scrambling, as Plato and Isocrates two and a half millennia ago, for a new theological formulation to protect themselves and to gain a bit of moral or intellectual high ground?

Plato and Isocrates represent a single, important moment in a long development of a more unified, transcendent theology that facilitated the conversion of the Graeco-Roman world to Christianity. Christians, of course, might view this as providential. Isocrates, at least, would have been horrified. So I have to ask, when we tailor our messages to the media we use now, are we changing our contemporary religions in a way that will lead to something we will not even recognize?

PRIMARY SOURCES


SECONDARY SOURCES


