

Faculty panel on Plato's *The Apology of Socrates*

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Moderator: Kendall Sharp

Question 5: Socrates invokes "God" and "the gods" a number of times in his address to the jury, at times using language that one audience member describes as vaguely Christian. What does this say about Socrates's view or religion?

Christopher Faraone responds.

Faraone: It's really quite an interesting document in that way. Most modern readers of this speech tend to overlook all the points that you're making. It's very interesting at the end of the *Prologue*; he says "well all of this is in God's hands anyway." That's a pretty interesting statement for him to say and the easiest way to dismiss this is to say it's highly ironic. In the end when he says "I'm listening to God, I'm on a divine mission," he's talking about the Oracle of Apollo and how he's interpreted it. I think one of the best arguments for this being a credible defense--that Socrates was trying within his own sensibility of honesty, to portray himself as a religious person--was that he was trying to show different ways that he was religious.

One of the interesting things about his speech is that they claim that he did not, and usually they translate the word "worship." Redfield translates it as "observe"--it's a very problematic verb in ancient Greek, but it means to recognize a divinity. There's no evidence that Socrates ever attacked civic worship of the normal sort. He clearly was interested in that juncture where the divine and the human met, and so he clearly criticized conventional ideas about piety and what it meant to be pious. We have several anecdotes about him offering sacrifice and engaging in the usual kind of worship that Greeks did. What made his own sense of religion different is his so-called *dimonion*--this is another Greek word--it means "a little God." This is the voice that he talks to and that

talks to him and that tells him only when not to do something. So for me, I think that this speech raises a number of different ways in which he feels that he actually is acknowledging the existence of the divine. Modern readers who are uncomfortable with that will say the *dimonion* is just his conscience, and it's very easy to do that. It's a little voice that tells you when not to do something and it's something that I've been talking to my adolescent son about, you know? There are other ways to explain that, but I think you're right to point out whether or not it has any broader interpretational value of the speech itself.

I think it's one of a number of factors. Because he's actually answering the charge of impiety, one of the three charges, so he has to spend some time doing that. And I think he's done it very subtly and in a very interesting way.