

## Delphi in Plato's *Laws*

Commentators have been equally perplexed and dismayed by the central role that religion plays in the organization of the *polis* in Plato's *Laws* (Morrow 1993, Burnyeat 1997, Klosko 2006). A prime example is that Plato has the Athenian, his philosophical legislator, repeatedly defer to the authority of Delphi in regard to sacred law: "They should get their laws regulating all the divine things from Delphi, and establish interpreters of them who will explain how to use them" (759c-d, cf., 738c, 828a, 865b, 914a). Undoubtedly, part of the reason why Plato has the Athenian do this is because it was customary to consult Delphi before founding a colony. Yet if Plato intended the *Law's* political regime to be the rule of Reason (νοῦς), or the rule of law, which is said to be the best imitation (μιμεῖσθαι) of the rule of Reason (713e-714a), then why does his philosophical legislator start by appealing to a traditional religious authority?

In this paper, I will argue that religion achieves similar ends as the *Republic's* noble lie—viz., social and political identity, friendship, and unity, (cf. *Rep.* 414c4- 414e6, *Laws* 738d-e, 841c4-8). Religion, however, has one great advantage over the noble lie—most of the citizens would not need to be compelled or persuaded to believe in it. The two myths, which comprise the *Republic's* noble lie, aim at a two-fold purpose: keeping the three classes separate and uncontaminated (through the myth of metals, 415a-c), while simultaneously fostering a sense of patriotism and *fraternité* (through the Phoenician tale, 414d-e). Socrates, however, admits that it would be very difficult to get at least the first generation of citizens to believe this story (415c6-d1). In the *Laws*, the Athenian says that through the advice of Delphi, they will "establish sacrifices...sanctify oracles, statues, altars, and shrines, and lay out sanctuaries" (738c). When the people get together at regular intervals for the sacrifices, "they will become friendly to one another...will feel they belong together, and will get to know one another [and] there is no

greater good for the city than this” (738d-e). Since the city of the *Laws* will not have such a rigid class structure, an analogue to the myth of metals is not needed. Religion in the *Laws*, however, achieves the same kind of friendship, unity, and group identity that the Phoenician tale aspired to but without having to resort to deception. Citizens will accept religion willingly because it is customary. Nevertheless Plato cannot appropriate Greek religion wholesale because certain aspects of traditional religion were dangerous to public morality (801a-c). Plato’s criticism of the poets’ theologies—especially those of Homer, Hesiod, and the tragedians—is well documented (e.g., Dombrowski 2005, Barfield 2011), and in this respect, the *Laws* reaffirms that criticism. Plato still wants to purify his citizens’ conception of divinity of the poets’ anthropomorphic categories, but he finds in Delphi a traditional theological attitude that is both authoritative and consistent with his own philosophy. Unlike the poets, Delphic theology stressed not the similarity between men and gods, but the vast difference. As Delphi repeatedly shows, it is hubris for humans to think they are like the gods. The recognition of the difference between gods and men leads both to reverence for the gods and to greater knowledge of oneself, which in turn leads to moderation, the opposite of hubris (647a-d). Throughout Plato’s corpus, Delphi’s teachings are shown to be consonant with the philosophical life (*Laws* 923a, *Charmides* 164d, *Protagoras* 343b, *Phaedrus* 230a, *Philebus* 48c). These same Delphic teachings—moderation, self-knowledge, and reverence—feature prominently in Magnesia’s educational program, where they are said to be essential to a happy, virtuous life, as well as to a stable and well-ordered city.

I will conclude by arguing that Delphi’s moral and religious instruction provides non-philosophical citizens with a path to virtue and happiness that is compatible with—not in conflict with—and broadly parallel to the life of philosophy. Moderation, above all, is the virtue that creates harmony between the philosopher and the non-philosophical citizen, between ruler and

ruled, and thus contributes to the harmony of the *polis* as a whole (635e-650b). The *Laws*, therefore, demonstrates how philosophy can coexist with the traditional piety that dominated the life of the *polis*.

#### Works cited

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