

In 399 BC, Socrates, son of Sophroniscus of Alopeke, was put to death in Athens. It has always been regarded as one of the greatest miscarriages of justice in all of history. How could the people of democratic Athens, home of free speech, execute a man merely for speaking his mind? An examination of the background of the trial may perhaps show that the case was not as clear in 399 as it seems to us now.

The formal charges were as follows: "Socrates is guilty of crime, because he does not believe in the gods recognized by the city, and introduces strange new divinities; he is also guilty because he corrupts the youth." The explicit charges, then, were two: impiety (not recognizing the old gods, and introducing new ones) and corrupting the youth (by passing on these irreligious ideas to them). The penalty demanded by the prosecution was death. The Greek people took their gods very seriously; they thought atheists were dangerous, because if the gods were offended by their blasphemies, they were quite likely to punish the city as a whole, not just the atheists. For instance, many Athenians believed that the vandalisation of sacred statues known as "herms" was the reason why the expedition to Sicily in 415 BC came to a miserable end. The charges against Socrates, then, were serious.

What grounds did people have for thinking Socrates irreligious? In the works of Plato, his devoted pupil, Socrates is depicted as a deeply religious, even saint-like man. Unfortunately, most people did not know Socrates as well as Plato. They lumped all philosophers together, considering them, at best, as eccentrics, and at worst, as dangerous blasphemers. Public opinion of philosophers can best be gauged from a famous play of Aristophanes, the *Clouds*, which was produced in 423 BC. Socrates is the main figure in the play, and the object of much satirical abuse. He is portrayed as one who studies "things above the heavens and below the earth" — a shorthand way of referring to the subjects investigated by many philosophers, which we would today rather identify as scientific topics. Everyone knew these fellows were blasphemers — why, they even believed that the moon was not a goddess, but a lump of rock! The gods would not allow such nonsense to go unpunished forever.

Socrates is also portrayed as a man who can "make the weaker argument appear the stronger" — that is, as an expert in rhetoric, which is another way of saying a Sophist. The Sophists were a group of controversial

thinkers and teachers well known in Classical Athens for their questioning of traditional values and beliefs, including those of religion. Socrates certainly was interested in many of the same topics as the Sophists, and was often seen in their company. We know that he disagreed sharply with them in important ways, but these differences would probably not be noticed by the average member of the public. The art of persuasion and public speaking was a particular specialty of the Sophists. Since they believed in no lasting truths or permanent values, all that mattered was convincing other people of your point of view by using whatever rhetorical strategies were available. This skill was important in Greek cities, because public speaking was the only form of mass communication, and the ability to persuade a large group of people was an indispensable weapon in the arsenal of the politician. People were suspicious, however, of anyone who would want to make a weak case win over a strong one. One should only want to argue what was right and good for the city. Socrates, then, was suspected of being nothing but a devious and immoral Sophist.

Socrates certainly did question some aspects of traditional religion. For example, he thought that myths depicting the gods as stealing, cheating, committing adultery and the like, were simply lies, because the gods were in his view perfectly good beings. This seems an admirable notion to us, and anything but impious; but at the time it involved challenging traditional religious tales. Socrates also claimed to hear a voice in his head, which he called his *daimonion*, or "little spirit." Today we might explain this experience by saying, perhaps, that he had a touch of schizophrenia, which can involve hearing voices; however, in the ancient world, no such sophisticated explanations were available, and such a phenomenon would be assumed to have a supernatural origin. The problem was that Socrates appeared to be claiming a kind of personal pipeline to the gods. This was dangerously close to impiety. In another dialogue of Plato, the *Euthyphro*, the *daimonion* is explicitly identified as the "new god" of the indictment. Since Socrates also thought he had been given a mission by Apollo, through his oracle at Delphi, to pester everyone in Athens day in and day out about their ethical beliefs and standards of behaviour, what might have been a mere curiosity or eccentric mannerism was transformed into a menacing plan of action. Socrates' constant questioning and challenging of people on the subject of right and wrong was irritating and at times humiliating, and his skill at demolishing arguments made him look very much like a Sophist. It also made him many enemies.

Widespread prejudice against Socrates may be sufficient to explain the charges against him. Nothing else is mentioned in the *Apology of Socrates* written by Plato, which purports to be an account of the speech delivered by Socrates at his trial. Many scholars have suspected, however, that there

was more involved than this. In the *Clouds*, Socrates is also portrayed as a friend of Sparta and an enemy of the democracy. It was easy to make such a suggestion; it was part of the popular image of intellectuals as snobs who despised ordinary people, and were therefore undemocratic. It does seem to be true that Socrates had reservations about democracy. Plato several times represents him as wondering why, in the case of any other branch of knowledge – from shoemaking to medicine – we go to the experts for assistance and guidance, but in the case of the most important branch of all, government, we think that everyone is equally qualified to offer an opinion. This was a fair criticism of the system of the time, but it would not have been a popular one. It hardly made him a traitor or a Sparta-lover, but it made it easy to believe he was. It definitely did not help Socrates' cause that he was a close friend of the most notorious traitor of the war, Alcibiades (see *Labyrinth* nos. 53-54). Even worse, he was a friend of Critias and Charmides, two of the cruel tyrants who ruled Athens after the Peloponnesian War, when the democracy was overthrown. The Thirty, as the ruling oligarchs were known, embarked on a reign of terror, killing hundreds and confiscating their property. Critias was their leader. These were the most violent anti-democrats of the day, and Socrates was their friend. Never mind that he refused their order to arrest an innocent man, and would never condone or take part in their crimes; many jurors would only remember that he was their close companion, and nothing would shake their belief that he was an enemy of Athens.

Although Socrates never claims the charges were politically motivated, many scholars have thought they were. The reason there is no mention of these motives in the *Apology* is that an amnesty had been declared after the restoration of the democracy in 403, and it was illegal to prosecute anybody for involvement in the crimes of the oligarchy. Consequently, the prosecutors had to find other charges, such as impiety, to get Socrates into court.

At the trial, Socrates displayed a somewhat defiant and uncompromising attitude to the jury. Athenian juries were used to being pandered to, not lectured at. Socrates believed he should speak nothing but the truth, unpalatable though it might be, and thought it shameful to indulge in cheap rhetorical tricks or appeals for sympathy. To do so would truly make him a Sophist. The irony was, so many people were already convinced of his Sophism, that they looked on this strategy of plain talking as simply another devious trick. No matter what Socrates said they would never be convinced.

Perhaps Socrates could not hope to win. When he was found guilty, and required to propose a counterpenalty to the death sentence demanded by the

prosecution, he first proposed – because he still believed he had genuinely helped the city – that he be maintained at public expense the rest of his life. Although not completely serious, this proposal would have insulted the jury. Socrates then proposed a ludicrously small fine of 100 drachmae – all he could afford as a poor man. Before he sat down, his friends at the court (Plato among them) indicated they would stand surety for 3,000 drachmae, a reasonable fine, which Socrates then proposed. But the damage was done, and the jury – more of them, in fact, than voted him guilty in the first place – chose the death penalty. A month later, Socrates drank the hemlock in prison, and died a martyr to his faith.