

# PLATONISM AND THE WORLD CRISIS

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## PREFACE

I am conscious of employing here a somewhat portentous title for what I am about to say, a title which may promise rather more than is actually going to be delivered; but it is in fact my deeply-held conviction that Plato, and the tradition deriving from him, has a number of important things to say to the modern world, to which the modern world would do well to listen. Of course, Plato had no conception of the nature or complexity of the issues with which modern civilisation is currently faced, but nonetheless, it seems to me, there are many useful insights which we may derive both from his own works – in particular his last great work, *The Laws* – and from those of certain of his followers, in particular Plotinus.

The topics on which I would like to focus my attention on this occasion are just three, but they seem to me to be such as, between them, to represent the great bulk of what is wrong with modern western society, and what is inexorably putting intelligent life on this planet under mortal threat. They are the following:

- (1) *The problem of the destruction of the environment and of waste disposal.*
- (2) *The problem of religious conflict and mutual intolerance.*
- (3) *The problem of the legitimation of authority and the limits of personal freedom.*

On each of these questions it will be found, I think, that Plato has things of importance to say. I will address them in turn.

## I

Let us start with the question of the radical imbalance currently prevailing between us and our environment. This is not, of course, just a problem of advanced Western civilisation, though it is a problem primarily caused by it. We are being joined in our aspiration for an affluent and wasteful lifestyle, in particular, by two enormous members of the emergent world, China and India, who, between them, have the capacity to sink the planet simply by seeking, as they have a perfect right to do, to emulate the material achievements of the chief Western powers, in particular the United States; while at the same time much of the so-called ‘third world’, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, is

engaged in a reckless proliferation of its population without exhibiting the slightest ability to support even its existing numbers.

At the root of our problems in this area over the last two hundred years or so is quite simply the modern concept of progress – that is to say, linear development upwards and outwards in all areas of society. We must build ever more roads, more houses, more public facilities; we must increase wealth – the Gross National Product – increase trade, exploit ever more fully all natural resources, vegetable, animal, and mineral. The inevitable increase in population consequent on that then necessitates further such development. And all this is naively viewed as progress towards a happy and glorious future.

This concept of progress is so deeply ingrained in our psyches that it is hard for modern man to comprehend a culture in which no such concept is present. But such was the situation prevailing, so far as I know, in all pre-modern (let us say, pre-1600 A.D.) societies, and notably in the high civilisations of Greece and Rome, which, along with the Judaeo-Christian tradition, are our own direct ancestors. Among Greek and Roman intellectuals, it was fully recognised that nations and societies had their ups and down, that empires rose and fell – and there may even be discerned, in the period of the high Roman Empire (notably the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D.) the notion that political arrangements, in the form of the *Pax Romana*, had attained a sort of apex, if not of perfection, then at least of satisfactoriness – but nowhere can we discern any trace of the modern obsession with ‘progress’. On the contrary, it was universally accepted that change in the physical world was cyclical: some new inventions were made from time to time, predominantly in the area of warfare, populations might increase locally, and cities, such as Alexandria, Rome or Constantinople, grow to great size, communications, in the form of roads or safe passage on the sea, might improve marginally; but all this would be balanced by a decline somewhere else – none of these local developments was thought to be such as to disturb the overall cyclical nature of sublunar existence, especially as the life of the physical world, as it ceaselessly unrolled itself, was seen merely as a temporal projection of the eternal life of a higher, intelligible world, in which, of course, there was no question of change or development.

The nearest thing, I suppose, to an exception to this world-view was provided by thinkers in the early Christian tradition, who did indeed look forward to an end-time, the second Coming of Christ and the Day of Judgement, towards which all human life was working, a progression upon which Christ’s first coming was an important milestone. This Christian scenario does indeed involve a concept of linear progress, albeit of a distinctly other-worldly variety, but it has been argued, and I think not without some plausibility, that it is this Christian concept, duly secularized and truncated of its

culmination in a Last Judgement that has spawned the modern concept of endless material progress.

For it is, after all, endless, and herein surely lies its inherent contradiction, and much of its perniciousness. Although all our material progress is notionally working towards some goal, this goal can logically never be attained. It must always be receding over the horizon, as it is an essential part of the dogma of modern capitalist development that a slow-down in the rate of growth is a disaster, as that is to be equated with *stagnation*, and stagnation is a very bad thing indeed, being next of kin to the ultimate misfortune, which is *recession*. So the Gross National Product has to keep on rising, and World Trade has got to keep on increasing, and the under-privileged hundreds of millions of China, India and elsewhere must continue to aspire to the ownership of motor-cars, second homes, computers, refrigerators, and video-recorders.

Most importantly, there can be no 'steady state' at the end of this rainbow. Every aspect of the economy must go on increasing exponentially. And herein lays the root of the crisis. Already we are seeing the disastrous results of global warming – a phenomenon in face of which the greatest polluter on the planet, the United States, is quite simply in a state of denial – most dramatically on sub-Saharan Africa, where desertification is spreading relentlessly, and at the two poles, where the icecaps are melting fast, but everywhere in recent years extremes of weather have been manifesting themselves, not least in the United States itself, with a succession of notable hurricanes. We are also seeing the initial steps in what is going to become an increasingly frantic battle for ever-shrinking oil resources – the preposterous and disastrous efforts to bring 'freedom and democracy', first to Afghanistan, and then to Iraq, being the opening shots, soon to be followed by devious intrigues among the corrupt regimes of Central Asia. And all this because our civilisation is, it seems, hopelessly hooked on the ever-increasing consumption of non-renewable fossil fuels.

At the same time as all this exponentially growing consumption is going on, we are faced also with the ever-increasing problem of the disposal of the waste matter generated by our life-style, some of it very toxic indeed, and all of it troublesome in one degree or another. Some years ago, a widely disseminated calculation estimated that the average middle-class American generates up to twenty-five times as much garbage as the average Indian or African villager, the average European not being far behind and of course much more of that garbage is non-biodegradable. Admittedly, efforts are being made, much more seriously on the continent of Europe than either here in Ireland or in the U.S., to recycle as much of this as possible, but in this country in particular more or less every effort to re-process waste materials productively is met by ignorant or vexatious objections, and those by people who are generally every bit as productive of garbage as anyone else.

And that is only in relation to household rubbish. There is also the problem of commercial and medical waste, and beyond that the problem of the

reckless pollution of rivers and lakes by farmers either ignorantly applying too much fertiliser to their fields, in search of ever-higher yields, or carelessly or dishonestly disposing of farmyard slurry. Everywhere one turns these days, one comes upon one aspect or another of the detritus of a culture expanding out of control.

So what does Plato, and the Platonist tradition, have to say about all this? What, one might wonder, could he possibly have to say? In fact, I want to propose to you that he has a great deal to say, and that we would do well to listen to him. I will take my examples primarily from his last work, *The Laws*, in which he presents us with his most serious sketch of an ideal state, but I will start from a passage in his more famous work, *The Republic* – also a sketch of an ideal state, but a far more peculiar one than that of *The Laws*, and one, I am convinced, that is not to be taken literally.

However, in Book II of *The Republic*, where he is engaged in a schematic account of the genesis of the state, he makes a particularly significant point when describing the transition from a primitive stage of society – which he portrays, with more than a touch of satire, as a kind of Golden Age utopia, in which small communities are living in complete harmony with their environments – to a more advanced stage, which he terms the ‘pampered’ or ‘luxury-loving’ state (*tryphôsa polis*) – or, more pointedly, the ‘fevered’ state (*phlegmainousa polis*). This is, of course, the situation in which all existing societies find themselves, and it comes about, he proposes (II 372E<sub>ff</sub>), as a result of the incessant desire to add luxuries to the necessities of life. To quote him:

“There are some people, it appears, who will not be content with this sort of fare, or this sort of life-style (sc. of the primitive state); couches will have to be added, and tables and other furniture, yes, and relishes and myrrh and incense and courtesans and cakes – all sorts of all of them! And the items we first mentioned, houses and clothes and shoes, will no longer be confined to the level of the necessary, but we must introduce painting and embroidery, and procure gold and ivory and similar adornments, must we not?”

The consequence of this process of elaboration, as he goes on to point out, will be that the state will have to become bigger, and thus encroach on its neighbours (who will simultaneously be driven to encroach upon it), and the inevitable result of that will be that wars will break out, in the struggle to acquire more land and resources, or to protect trade routes – as ever-increasing foreign trade will follow necessarily from the demand for luxuries.

Is this not all, I would ask, though written in the middle of the fourth century B.C., depressingly relevant to our present situation? We flatter ourselves that we have attained to a high degree of rationality and orderliness in our international relations, after the excesses of the past century in particular, but we must face the unpalatable fact that this thin façade of reasonableness will quickly break down if anyone dares to try to part us from our oil – as I say, the attempted ‘liberation’ of Iraq is only the first step in such a break-down; and

such interventions as this will inevitably provoke ever more desperate and extreme responses from those who feel that they are being ruthlessly exploited, and have nothing to lose. And in the midst of all this mayhem, the oil itself, even making allowances for dramatic new discoveries in Central Asia and in Asiatic Russia, will inevitably run out in considerably less than a century from now. It is a limited, and non-renewable, resource.

So is there any solution to this problem? I am not at all sure that there is, but if there is, it has to be along the lines sketched out by Plato in his *Laws*. Now Plato is of course operating at a much simpler level than is appropriate for us, but, *mutatis mutandis*, I think that he can provide us with much food for thought. One of the first conditions that he establishes for his ideal state, in Book V of the work, is that its membership is to be strictly limited. This is easier to do, of course, when one is establishing a new colony, as he is, but the principle can be applied, broadly, to any state.

Let us take Ireland, for example. We in this country are in a rather interesting position in the modern world. We are a nation that, something over 150 years ago, had really far too many inhabitants for the resources available to support them – something over 8 million – and a dreadful famine was the result. I would not wish here to deny that British laissez-faire capitalism and plain indifference to Irish misery contributed to the dreadfulness, but the fact remains that the famine occurred because there were too many people for the available resources – and this is a situation being repeated in many parts of Africa, India and China today. However, in Ireland at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the situation is very different. After an initial halving of the population in the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and many decades of stagnation after that, our numbers are now rising, in response to the stimulus of unprecedented prosperity in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, towards the 5 million mark. The question now arises, is there somewhere in here an ideal number of people to inhabit this green and pleasant land?

I have seen it stated, by responsible economists and demographers, that we probably could now support a population of something like the 8 million that pullulated here in misery in the early 1840s, and I don't doubt that they have a reasonable case. But, even if we granted that, the question arises, where do we stop? Are we to look forward then to 10 million? 15 million? After all, Holland, for instance, among our European neighbours, is about the size of Munster, and is now home to 16 million, and rising. Admittedly, they are Dutch – highly organised, very disciplined, used to living cheek-by-jowl – and we are... who we are, and used to a somewhat more chaotic and less crowded lifestyle; but still, the question may be raised.

I would like to answer the question, baldly and controversially, by proposing that an ideal population for us on this island would be just 5, 040, 000 – and I will now reveal why. Plato, in *Laws V* (737Dff.), declares that his ideal state, Magnesia, should consist of just 5040 households – that is to say, 5040 heads of

household, with their wives and offspring, for a total citizen population of something like 20,000 – 25,000. This number – which is arrived at for amusing numerological reasons (it is divisible by all the numbers up to ten, and 59 ways in all!) – is truly tiny by modern standards, and need not be taken seriously in itself. What is significant about it is the ideological position that it represents. It lays down the principle of a ‘steady-state’ economy, of balance with the environment, and as such should be taken very seriously indeed. What Plato specifies is that the legislator should study the territory available very carefully, and determine as exactly as possible what number of people it could support ‘in modest comfort’, and then stick to that. It is central to his system that every citizen should have a basic stake in society, a land-holding that is inalienable and may not be subdivided: “the number of hearths established by the initial distribution must always remain the same; it must neither increase nor decrease. The best way for every state to ensure this will be as follows: the recipient of a holding should always leave from among his children only *one* heir to inherit his establishment.<sup>4</sup> This will be his favourite son, who will succeed him and give due worship to the ancestors... of the family and state” (740B). The other children will be married off, if girls, or given out for adoption by childless households, if required – or else simply required to emigrate.

This is a stern arrangement – though something like that in fact prevailed unofficially in this country for many generations, God knows! – but there is a more positive aspect to it. Plato is above all concerned that no one in his society should fall below a certain level of modest prosperity; if they were to prove quite unable to run their allotment, they would simply be asked to leave the country (though every sort of advice and encouragement would be offered to them before that happened). Conversely, although Plato recognises the desirability of acknowledging different degrees of industriousness among the citizenry, and therefore allows some gradations in wealth, he is adamant that no one may be allowed to accumulate more than five times the basic property-valuation. Ancient Greeks did not think in terms of income, but rather of property, but if we were to transpose this principle into modern terms, we could say, as a rule of thumb, that, if the basic wage were fixed at, say, E 20, 000, then no one – doctor, lawyer, property speculator, or IT whiz-kid – for whatever reason, could be allowed to earn more than E 100, 000 per annum. If they wished to go beyond that, they would, once again, be asked to leave the country. As Plato puts it (744E-745A):<sup>5</sup>

“The legislator will use the holding as his unit of measure and allow a man to possess twice, thrice, and up to four times its value. If anyone acquires more than this,

<sup>4</sup> This goes against normal Athenian practice, according to which a man’s property is divided equally among his sons. Plato is not advocating the custom of primogeniture, however, as will be seen in a moment.

<sup>5</sup> In my quotations from the *Laws*, I adopt in general the excellent Penguin translation of Trevor Saunders.

by finding treasure-trove or by gift or by a good stroke of business or some other similar lucky chance which presents him with more than he's allowed, he should hand over the surplus to the state and its patron deities, thereby escaping punishment and gaining a good name for himself."

This, I must say, seems to me an excellent provision, much as it would disgust the contemporary neo-conservative ideologists of capitalism. In modern terms, one would simply have to prescribe that anyone earning over five times the minimum wage would have the choice, and privilege, of donating his surplus to one of a number of approved public or private enterprises – I would naturally favour third-level education, but I recognise that there are many other very worthy causes out there! – or have the money removed from him by 100% taxation. It seems to me that society as a whole would be immensely the better for this, despite the frustration caused to a few. After all, as Plato remarks in the *Republic*, it is not our purpose to make any one class in the state happy, but rather the state as a whole.

I would certainly not wish to claim that Plato's vision of Magnesia is without flaws or defects. In particular, Plato exhibits a truly aristocratic disdain for anything approximating to 'trade' or industrial production, other than agriculture, in which we need not follow him. However, in his insistence on limiting such production (which in his ideal state would actually be performed by resident foreigners and/or slaves) to necessities rather than luxuries, and his insistence that, though there could be, no doubt, improvements in efficiency and effectiveness, there should be at all events no overall *growth*, I think that we should pay very serious attention to him. If his vision of a modest sufficiency of material goods sounds a little like that of Mr. De Valera, in his famous St. Patrick's Day address of 1943, that is no accident; as political thinkers Plato and Dev had actually quite a lot in common. Let us take a passage of the *Laws* on the question of the possession of material wealth, and then append to that a portion of Dev's address. First Plato (743C-744A):

"The whole point of our legislation was to allow the citizens to live supremely happy lives in the greatest possible mutual friendship. However, they will never be friends if injuries and lawsuits arise amongst them on a grand scale, but only if they are trivial and rare. That is why we maintain that neither gold or silver should exist in the state, and there should not be much money made out of menial trades and charging interest... The citizens' wealth should be limited to the products of farming, and even here a man should not be able to make so much that he can't help forgetting the real reason why money was invented (I mean for the care of the soul and body, which without physical and cultural education respectively will never develop into anything worth mentioning). That's what has made us say more than once that the pursuit of money should come last in the scale of value. Every man directs his efforts to three things in all, and if his efforts are directed with a correct sense of priorities he will give money the third and lowest place, and his soul the highest, with his body coming somewhere between the two."

Now, as I say, we do not have to follow him in imposing a total ban on gold or silver money; let us focus rather on his scale of priorities.

And now here is Dev:

“Let us turn aside for a moment to that ideal Ireland that we would have. That Ireland which we dreamed of would be the home of a people who valued material wealth only as the basis for right living, of a people who were satisfied with frugal comfort and devoted their leisure to the things of the spirit – a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contests of athletic youths and the laughter of comely maidens, whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of serene old age. It would, in a word, be the home of a people living the life that God desires that man should live.”

It has in recent years become sadly customary, among the forward-thinking sophisticates of modern Ireland, to mock this speech – particularly, I suppose, the romplings of sturdy children, contests of athletic youths and the laughter of comely maidens (with which we may, I suppose, aptly contrast the proceedings every weekend nowadays in such venues as Temple Bar and elsewhere) – but I am inclined to salute it as an approximation to a noble vision. It is, at any rate, entirely in line with the vision of Plato.

What Plato, then, is presenting for our scrutiny is a strictly regulated ‘steady-state’ society, designed to secure both internal harmony by reason of the justice of its political and sociological arrangements, and harmony with its natural environment by ensuring that the demands it puts upon it do not exhaust or distort that environment. I should specify, in connexion with the former aim, that Plato placed enormous stress on education for citizenship (*paideia*), beginning from infancy,<sup>6</sup> with the purpose of ensuring the full understanding of, and assent to, the principles on which the state was founded, on the part of the whole citizen body. In modern times, the United States goes some way towards this ideal – and of course the former Soviet Union and its satellites strove unsuccessfully to do so, as does China even now – but we in Europe have largely abdicated from any effort along these lines. Plato wanted above all, as did Benjamin Franklin and the other founders of the American Republic, an educated citizenry, any of whom could take on administrative responsibilities if necessary, but all of whom could at least make an informed judgement as to who among them was best qualified to rule, and vote accordingly. Indeed, so strongly did he feel on this point that anyone who proved unable or unwilling to exercise his citizenship was to be asked to leave the state altogether. There was no place in Magnesia for the ‘Don’t knows’!

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<sup>6</sup> Indeed, from the womb, since he even presents regulations for harmonious exercises on the part of pregnant women, to ensure that their offspring get off to a good start (VII 788E ff)!



To turn briefly to the problem of waste disposal: this is something on which Plato has really nothing to say, for the good reason that in the world, as he knew it, it was not a problem. The Classical Greeks were not necessarily a particularly tidy people – standards of hygiene in ancient cities would leave much to be desired from a modern perspective – but the fact was that most waste was thoroughly biodegradable and non-toxic, and did not pile up in such amounts as to constitute a crisis – dogs and birds could deal with most of it. What is left over is mostly the potsherds and metal utensils that give such delight to modern archaeologists; there were no indestructible plastics or radio-active residues to worry about. I think, however, that we can reasonably extrapolate from our knowledge of his philosophy in general so far as to say that he would have required that all the waste products of his ideal state should be recycled in one way or another – any pile-up of unusable garbage would inevitably indicate that society was no longer in harmony with its environment.

A further question might well occur to you, and it is one that I find a little awkward to answer, but answered it must be. It is all very well for Plato, you might say, to specify a fixed population of 5040 homesteads, and then say that all superfluous persons must simply leave; but how, in a modern democratic state, can one presume to set any sort of cap on population growth? The first reply I would make to that is to observe that it is in fact a feature of advanced western societies to limit their population growth spontaneously, to the extent that in Western Europe generally the indigenous population has attained something like steady state (with countries like Italy and Greece, – rather surprisingly – exhibiting a net decline); but nevertheless one must make provision for worst-case scenarios! If, as I feel would not be the case, population increase continued relentlessly, it would be necessary to take certain steps. One simple one would be to limit children's allowances to the first three children of any couple, instead of actually increasing them, as is currently the case. This would send out a pretty clear signal, I should think – though of course stirring up indignation in certain quarters. A more extreme procedure would be – along Plato's own lines, but also borrowing a feature from the Kyoto Protocol on the production of greenhouse gases – that any children over the number of three produced by a given couple – or indeed a single mother – would have to be presented for adoption by childless couples, or at least those who had less than the maximum permitted number; or else the errant couple would actually have to 'buy' the variance to keep another child from some couple who had less than the specified number – very much as Ireland is currently having to pay up for generating too much carbon dioxide! And of course, parallel with all this, possibilities of immigration would have to be very strictly limited.

I realise, of course, that such provisions will strike many decent people as deeply shocking, but I would suggest to them in response that the situation

that the human race as a whole currently faces is so serious that a seismic shift in our ethical consciousness will be necessary. It must come to seem (as I believe it is) deeply selfish and irresponsible, and hence positively *immoral*, to have more children than the environment can support, and such legislative provisions as I have outlined will only be expressing this sense of general disapproval. Morality, after all, is not a fixed quantity, much as religiously-minded people might like to think that it is; ethical positions shift in answer to changing societal circumstances – and it is quite reasonable that they should.

## II

But that is, perhaps, enough about that for the moment! The second issue that I want to deal with is that of the clash of religious traditions, and religious intolerance in general. On the world stage, what we currently find ourselves faced with is the disastrous fact that, even as irrational and violent differences between the various Christian sects have either faded away or are steadily lessening (except in such odd corners of the world as Northern Ireland!), the old antagonism between Christianity and Islam has taken on new and deadly forms. Of course, as we are constantly and correctly being reminded, this antagonism is not primarily fueled by theological concerns – it is rather a response to the beastly treatment by the *Christian* United States' protégé Israel of its Palestinian neighbours, and more generally to the shock to Islamic morality inflicted by the gross vulgarity of Western (and again, largely American) popular culture, which floods in upon traditional Muslim societies through films, TV, music and glossy magazines. This is not to deny that Muslim society could do with some serious shocks, particularly in respect of its attitude to women, and to the treatment of criminals, but that does not lessen the force of the shocks inflicted, and this provokes a strong reaction, of some of the results of which we are all too aware.. We must add to these provocations the economic pressures of Western consumer society, which are also afflicting the majority of the inhabitants of Muslim nations, those who are not so fortunate as to belong to the Westernized elites who can enjoy the more positive aspects of consumerism. We saw, back in 1979, what could happen in a state such as Iran, and what in recent years has brought an (admittedly most moderate and circumspect) Islamist party to power in secular Turkey; and we should take due note of the pressures which are building up in such a society as Saudi Arabia.

However, all that said, the fact remains that this reaction is expressed in a distinctly *religious* mode, and it is the intransigent attitudes of both Christianity and Judaism that lends fuel to it. I speak with some feeling, as I have been recently browsing extensively in the Qur'an, and have come to see that, despite a good deal of polemic, Mohammed's revelation is deeply rooted in

both Jewish and Christian thought. I myself would have considerable difficulty with the Prophet's prohibition on wine (which I believe was actually the result of rather local concerns, in the form of his objection to the use of wine in rituals honouring pagan goddesses in the region of Mecca), but in many other areas I feel that he has a lot to teach us. Primarily, though, Islam is traditionally much more tolerant of Judaism and Christianity than they have been of it. It sees itself, after all, as merely the culmination of a series of revelations which were made in earlier times to Abraham, to Moses, and to Jesus, and it incorporates much of what they had to say in its sacred text. The chief scandal and absurdity, from their point of view, is the claim by later Christians (though, they feel, not by Jesus himself) that he was, in some physical way, the *son* of God – and I must confess I find myself very much in agreement with them on that point. If the Christians could see their way to reformulating Jesus' status to that simply of a major prophet, and a man specially chosen and inspired by God, then, I think, the three great 'religions of the Book' could largely agree to differ on who delivered the most perfect and *final* revelation. The political and social pressures and sources of aggravation would continue, of course, but they would not be fueled to the same extent by theological tensions.

But where, you may ask, does Plato and Platonism come into all this? Very significantly, I feel. Plato has an interesting attitude to established religion. On the one hand, as a legislator, he is most particular that the gods should be worshipped by the citizens of his state in the most conventional and traditional way. Atheism or irreverence he is prepared to punish most severely, as being profoundly subversive of morality. But he himself does not believe in the gods in their traditional forms, nor does he expect the wisest and most senior citizens in his ideal state to do so; and this attitude of his (which was in fact, it must be admitted, by no means unique to him among the intellectuals of Classical Athens) communicated itself to his successors, in the form of a tradition of allegorizing religious symbols and myths.

In his early dialogue *Euthyphro*, Plato makes his mentor Socrates probe mercilessly the theological assumptions of the pompous Euthyphro, who is actually representing, albeit in an extreme form, the beliefs of the Athenian people in general. It is plain from Socrates' questions that he does not accept the traditional myths about the gods, their amours, their other interventions in the human world, and their quarrels among themselves. Later, in Book II of the *Republic* (378A ff.), Plato makes Socrates lay down a set of rules about how to talk about the gods, which once again indicates Plato's rejection of traditional mythology. The gods, or God – Plato is quite happy to talk about 'God' (*ho theos*) in the singular – must not be described as doing any harm to, or perpetrating any deception upon, men; God is entirely good, and eternally unchanging. This effectively takes care of the great bulk of Greek traditional theology, which Socrates proceeds to take apart.

And yet in the *Republic*, and more clearly still in the *Laws*, Plato insists on scrupulous religious observance in his ideal state. The traditional gods of the Olympian pantheon, though stripped of all unsuitable stories about them, are to be worshipped in the traditional manner, and so are a host of lesser divinities, daemons, heroes and even nymphs. In Book V of the *Laws* (738Cf.), he insists that all traditional ceremonies and sacrifices should be performed, and that all the citizens should attend the festivals. There is to be a full set of temples on the acropolis of the central town, and other precincts of the gods in each of the twelve divisions into which the state is divided (745Bff.).

How are we to reconcile these positions? Is Plato being simply disingenuous, and promoting traditional religion as something like an 'opium of the people? Well, I think that one would have to admit that he is not being entirely straightforward, but he is not being hypocritical either. He would reconcile these two positions by the application of allegorical exegesis. In Book X of the same *Laws*, after all, in the course of an attack on atheism (which, as I have said, is a serious crime in his state), he launches into an exposition of the real nature of the divine power in the world. This, it turns out, is nothing other than a rational World-Soul, and the traditional gods are merely manifestations of various aspects of this entity at work in the world. This truth, however, is only to be imparted to a very limited group of the wisest and most experienced of the citizens, who form a rather peculiar Council of State, known as the Nocturnal Council, from their custom of meeting just before dawn to consider basic issues connected with the smooth running of the state.

So for Plato the world was created – though timelessly – and is administered by an impersonal, though benign and intelligent, entity, which is best worshipped, however, by the observance of traditional rituals – and this would be true of all well-run states, whatever their particular traditions about the gods. There was absolutely no proselytizing tendency among the ancient Greeks, despite their firm conviction of their superiority to all other peoples. They were interested in other people's gods, but only to the extent of trying to assimilate them in their own minds to their indigenous gods, and occasionally – as in the case of interesting deities like the Egyptian Isis, or the Anatolian Cybele or Adonis – adopting them into their own religious system.

There are surely a number of important lessons here for us in the modern world. First of all, we must, I would maintain, divest ourselves finally of any nagging concern that we still may have that the whole human race should come to believe exactly what we believe – if only we could decide exactly what that was! Christians and Muslims are particularly guilty of this dangerous obsession – other religions, such as Judaism, Buddhism or Confucianism, are blessedly free of it. We must come to see other religious traditions as simply pursuing other paths – not better or worse ones – to the same goal, of paying due respect to the one positive divine force in the universe.

But secondly, we must learn to allegorize our beliefs, rather than rejecting them outright in a fit of misplaced rationality – to see our particular ceremonies and myths as bodying forth hidden symbolic representations of a higher truth, all of them ultimately reconcilable with one another. Within the two most troublesome faiths that I have picked out, I would commend, respectively, the positions of such Christian Platonists as Marsilio Ficino or Giovanni Pico della Mirandola in Renaissance Italy, and the Sufi tradition within Islam. No adherent of either of these tendencies ever started a religious war, or burned anyone at the stake – though they occasionally suffered such a fate themselves. And it is to Plato, and in particular his later followers, the Neoplatonists Plotinus, Porphyry and Proclus, that both these traditions owe the degree of enlightenment that they possess. By all means let us continue to observe our respective traditions, but let us also refine and mellow them by resolving to see them henceforth as symbols of a higher truth, a truth that is ultimately mutually reconcilable – and on such details as whether or not to take a glass of wine, or to indulge in a loin of pork, let us just agree to differ.

### III

The last issue on which I wish to dwell is one that I would expect that many would find considerably less urgent than the other two areas of crisis that I have touched on, but one that seems to me just as important in its way, and that is the problem of the legitimation of authority in the context of advanced liberal democracy.

It may be that I am becoming just a little cranky in my old age, but it seems to me that one great problem that we in the West are facing is a progressive breakdown in the legitimation of authority. By that I mean an ever-increasing unwillingness on the part of citizens to accept the credentials of any authority, religious or secular, to prescribe what they shall do or not do; and this goes together with an avid enthusiasm for criticising the public and private conduct of those in public life, and for ascribing the worst possible motives to their actions.

Now of course one might say that in all too many cases, sadly, such an attitude is not unjustified, and that a healthy disrespect for the great and good is the hallmark of an advanced and highly educated democracy. I would just like to enter a plea for the proposition that this sort of thing can go too far, and lead inevitably to such phenomena as disregard of one's duties as a citizen (even to the extent of denying that there is such a thing as civic duty), a toleration of anti-social behaviour, and an unwillingness to make use of one's franchise in elections (the attitude of 'Ah sure what's the use? Aren't they all the same?').

It should be clear that no society can flourish very long when such attitudes prevail; but the question may well be asked in response, "Just what do

you propose to do about it?" It is here again, I think, that Plato can be of some help.

Admittedly, it is by no means obvious at first sight that Plato has anything much to offer to a modern liberal democracy. He was himself an unashamed totalitarian, who repeatedly expressed his disdain for contemporary Athenian democracy, which was in many ways – despite its direct participatory nature – more restrictive than our own. But we should look more closely, I would suggest, at just what Plato's position was.

His main objection to the contemporary democratic dogma, after all, is that it is held that citizenship is something that just comes naturally. There is no art or learning attached to being a good citizen, nor is there any expertise proper to good government. In theory, any Athenian was as capable of ruling as any other – provided that he was male and legitimate! – and any other citizen was entitled to challenge his credentials. For Plato, and for his master Socrates before him (if we can trust Plato's testimony), this is an absurd and thoroughly dangerous position to hold. It is his basic claim, in the area of political theory, that ruling is an art (*tekhnê*) or science (*epistêmê*), which must be acquired by a long and arduous process of self-discipline and study – study, indeed, of various rather abstract topics, chiefly mathematical in nature; and even to be a good citizen a process of self-examination ('know thyself' – *gnôthi seauton*) and moral training (*paideia*) is necessary.

He encapsulates his criticism of the democratic dogma in Book VI of the *Republic* (488A-E), with the striking image of the 'Ship of Fools':

"Imagine the following situation on a fleet of ships, or on one. The owner has the edge over everyone else on board by virtue of his size and strength, but he's rather deaf and short-sighted, and his knowledge of naval matters is just as limited. The sailors are wrangling with one another because each of them thinks that he ought to be captain, despite the fact that he's never learned how, and can't name his teacher or specify the period of his apprenticeship. In any case, they all maintain that it isn't something that can be taught, and are ready to butcher anyone who says it is. They're for ever crowding closely around the owner, pleading with him and stopping at nothing to get him to entrust the rudder to them. Sometimes, if their pleas are unsuccessful, but others get the job, they kill those others or throw them off the ship, subdue their worthy owner by drugging him or getting him drunk or something, take control of the ship, help themselves to its cargo, and have the kind of drunken and indulgent voyage you'd expect from people like that. And that's not all: they think highly of anyone who contributes towards their gaining power by showing skill at winning over or subduing the owner, and describe him as an accomplished seaman, a true captain, a naval expert; but they criticise anyone different as useless. They completely fail to understand that any genuine sea-captain has to study the yearly cycle, the seasons, the heavens, the stars and winds, and everything relevant to the job, if he's to be properly equipped to hold a position of authority in a ship. In fact, they think it's impossible to study and acquire expertise at how to

steer a ship (leaving aside the question of whether or not people want you to) and at the same time be a good captain.” (trans. Robin Waterfield).

Well, we get the message, I think. The ship-owner is the State, or the Sovereign People, and the crew members are the democratic politicians and ideologues. Much of his criticism, I feel, is applicable to our own situation, as much as to that of Classical Athens. We too hold in theory to the democratic creed that any citizen is *ipso facto* capable of rule, and that that requires no particular degree of expertise – though in practice we recognise that the details of government now have become so abstruse that there is need of a highly-trained civil service and a host of (highly-paid) advisers and consultants on top of that, to manage the politicians and set them right.

Plato, on the contrary, maintains that ruling is a science, and indeed the master science, and that perfection in it requires years of training. In the ideal state portrayed in the *Republic*, which is what is familiar to most people who know anything about him, this results in the rule of a small elite of so-called ‘philosopher-kings’, presiding over a large standing army-cum-police force, and a much larger proletariat of artisans and farmers, who constitute the productive element in the state, but who wield no power whatsoever.

I am always surprised, though, that this arrangement is taken seriously as a political blueprint by so many scholars who should know better, as well as by the general public. For me, the problem with it is this. It runs counter to one principle which was basic to Plato’s political philosophy, and which he inherited from Socrates (it features in the *Apology*, which is Socrates’ speech from the dock, as well as in the *Laws*), so that it cannot be dismissed as just something that he developed in his old age: the principle that any well-run state requires the *educated assent* of all the citizens, and this in turn requires that they *all* undergo the same *paideia*, or moral and intellectual training. This training is something that the lowest and largest class in the *Republic* conspicuously lacks – indeed, if the scenario presented is pressed to its logical conclusion, they do not even possess the brain to absorb such a training. In fact, what Plato is doing in the *Republic* is taking the opportunity to air a number of his cherished political ideas, while primarily presenting a schema of the well-ordered human soul, in which the reasoning element corresponds to the philosopher-kings, the spirited element to the soldiery, and the passionate element to the artisan class. The passionate element in the soul is essentially irrational, and must be subdued initially by force, though in a well-ordered soul it can come, like a well-trained and obedient dog, to assent to its being ruled, though without ever attaining full understanding of the whys and wherefores of that.

In the *Laws* – where he *is* being serious about constructing a state – we find a very different situation. Every citizen of the state, male and (to some extent, at least) female, is assumed to have been subjected to the same comprehensive education – beginning not just in infancy, but even in the womb

(Plato was a great believer in ante-natal exercises [cf. VII 788A-790A], to instil a sense of harmony into the unborn infant!) – which, while covering the basic skills of reading, writing and arithmetic, is primarily concerned with instilling right attitudes – young people are to learn, from their earliest years, to love and hate the right things (653A-C):

“I maintain that the earliest sensations that a child feels in infancy are of pleasure and pain, and this is the route by which virtue and vice first enter the soul... I call ‘education’ the initial acquisition of virtue by the child, when the feelings of pleasure and affection, pain and hatred, that well up in his soul are channelled in the right courses before he can understand the reason why. Then when he does understand, his reason and his emotions agree in telling him that he has been properly trained by inculcation of appropriate habits. Virtue is this general concord of reason and emotion. But there is one element you could isolate in any account you give, and this is the correct formation of our feelings of pleasure and pain, which makes us hate what we ought to hate from first to last, and love what we ought to love. Call this ‘education’, and I, at any rate, think you would be giving it its proper name.”

Now this, we might say, is outright ‘brain-washing’, and we might appear at first sight to have a point, but I think that we should be less free than we are in the use of that term. The aim of ‘brain-washing’ techniques, after all, is to scrub from the brain a set of existing beliefs, and to produce a sort of zombie in place of a reasoning being. Plato is concerned to inculcate right beliefs in brains which have not yet acquired any, and he would make no apology for that. It was his view that young persons should be set firmly on the right road, morally and intellectually, by their elders – and when they in turn come into the full possession of their reason, they will reflect rationally on their education, and see that it was the right one, and be duly grateful.

Now we in the western world are, not unreasonably, pretty uncomfortable these days about the inculcation of ‘values’ into the young – the whole process smacks of authoritarianism of one sort or another, religious or secular – and yet we do, I think, often wish that they had some values. Our position, I would argue, is in fact deeply incoherent, where Plato’s is coherent. We feel that there should be *some* instruction in schools concerning ethical principles and the duties of citizenship, but we have great difficulty in deciding just what that should be like. Is one, for instance, to have totally value-free, ‘non-judgemental’, sex education, or should one throw in some recommendations against reckless promiscuity and in favour of treating people as whole persons, rather than as mere sex-objects? And how about standards of honesty and public-spiritedness, when dealing with one another or with the state? Then, we are most uncomfortable in general about censorship of books and films, but we draw the line at child pornography and the stirring-up of racial hatred. And then we get very hot under the collar, and enact strict regulations, about smoking and drug-taking, but we simply wring our hands when faced with excessive drinking of alcohol or ingestion of junk foods. A censorious outsider, such as Plato – or indeed some relic from the former so-



cialist countries – might conclude that we have simply lost our nerve, and are floundering around from case to case.

I must confess that I have come to the conclusion, in my old age, that modern western society is going to have to tighten itself up, on various fronts, if we are to avert a serious breakdown of civil society. If we do not take the proper steps voluntarily, I would predict a series of outrages in the areas of morality and public order, which, like '9-11', will produce a convulsive over-reaction, and we will wake up one morning to find ourselves under a dictatorship far more unpleasant than anything that I am advocating.

So what am I advocating? Well, the single biggest innovation that I would propose is a system of National Service, and by that I mean something truly worthy of that name – not just a euphemism for military service (though I would have no objection to the imposition of military discipline during such a period!). It seems to me that our greatest failure as a society in modern times is to develop a mechanism for initiating young persons into adult life, a life of responsible citizenship, such as is more or less universal in more traditional societies, and was in place even in democratic Athens. The period from eighteen to twenty is one of great stress in most young people's lives, and it here that a regime of strict, though rational, order might most advantageously be imposed. This would, of course, involve considerable initial cost, but the savings in the avoidance of anti-social behaviour and blighted lives, as well as the various worthy FAS-style projects that the young people would be set to work on, would amply compensate for this in the long run.

Should such an institution be compulsory? Probably, but one alternative that occurs to me would be simply to make it clear that, if one refused to take part, one would henceforth no longer be considered a citizen of the state, for the purpose of receiving any benefits, such as health services, higher education, unemployment benefit or old age pension. That should settle the matter for most people. During the eighteen months or two years of service, young people, besides experiencing strict discipline and order, and performing useful physical labour, would attend lectures on the history and structure of the state, and on ethical and political theory. This sounds pretty heavy stuff for many young persons, but these subjects could be made lively and attractive with some thought and suitable packaging.

Not only would I prescribe this basic period of National Service: I would advocate that, as is the practice in Switzerland, for instance, at the present time, all adults should be encouraged to return to the system for a period of a week or two every year up to at least the age of sixty, and that they should be given time off from their work to do this, over and above their normal holiday allowance. I think that this would prove a very salutary 'topping-up' of the good practices that they had developed during their original service. It would be a tonic for both body and mind!

This, then, I would see as one key development, if one wished to restructure the state along more Platonic lines. I say *more* Platonic, as I would not for a moment advocate a full dose of Platonism for a modern state, even if there were any prospect of a modern state being prepared to take it. The degree of planning and control of citizens' lives which Plato advocates is something that I for one would find quite intolerable, and I am sure that this would be the general reaction. It is only the basic premise of Plato's political philosophy that I feel we have something to learn from, and that is that it is the right and duty of a state, not only to provide a life for its citizens, but a *good* life, in the sense of a virtuous and purposeful life. And since states cannot do their own providing, being abstract entities, this has to translate into a consensus, however arrived at, of the citizens over thirty – that is to say, the dominant generation. It is they, I should say, who have the right, and the duty, to prescribe codes of conduct, and subjects of study, for the younger generation, including, of course, their own children. If this dominant generation loses its nerve – as I must say I saw it doing in the America of the 1960's – then society as a whole begins to fall apart. When I arrived in Berkeley, California, in 1966, the slogan going around was 'Don't trust anyone over thirty!' In a well-run society, I would suggest, this slogan should be virtually reversed: 'Don't entrust any decision-making to anyone under thirty!'

If the principle of a period of National Service were accepted, I think that all else that is necessary would follow from that. Firstly, a sense of discipline and purposiveness would be projected downwards, throughout the school system; and secondly, the influence of the institution would progressively filter upwards throughout the state, as cohort after cohort graduated, and took their place in society. A spin-off of this would, I hope, be an enhanced respect – duly earned, one hopes! – for those in public office or other positions of authority, and a willingness to attribute the highest motives rather than the lowest to them, unless proved otherwise.

That is all I have to say on my third chosen topic. I realise that, on all three of these topics, which seem to me more or less the salient features of the crisis which is facing western civilisation in particular, but also the world in general, I have been driven to utter many hard sayings, and some things that may appear shocking to some sensibilities. What I have tried to do, though, is to apply principles that I discern in Plato, and the tradition that originates with him, to the world in which we live, to see if he might have anything to offer us. I have deliberately confined myself on this occasion to his political thought. Another discourse, on another occasion, might concern itself rather with his metaphysics, his belief in another realm of existence superior to this physical one, a realm of the spirit, where the purified soul may contemplate eternal truths without the interference of the body. But Plato himself is first of all a deeply political philosopher. His first priority is to get the *environment* right, to establish a state in which rational life and discourse can flourish. And that is what I have been concerned with on this occasion.