

# The Gods of the *Republic*

Mark L. McPherran / Simon Fraser University

At the opening of Plato's *Republic* Socrates recounts how he descended to the Piraeus to celebrate the inauguration of the festival of Bendis. With this religious beginning (and eschatological ending; 614b-621d) Plato's *Republic* announces itself to be a theological work as well as a political and moral one. This opening also suggests what the text goes on to confirm, namely, that one purpose of the *Republic* is to introduce a new cult outside the walls of the traditional dispensation. The divinity of this sect proves not to be a Thracian night-goddess, however, but the Reality of the Form-world, and its new worship involves not nocturnal horse races, but the intellectual activity of philosophizing. However, Plato is not prepared to dispense with the religion of his contemporaries. Rather, it seems evident that here, as in all of his dialogues, Plato follows the path of his teacher by appropriating and reshaping – but not rejecting -- the religious conventions of his own time in the service of establishing the new enterprise of philosophy.

Note in particular that there are over a hundred occurrences of 'god' or 'gods' spread through each of the *Republic's* ten books, with most occurring within the outline of the educational reforms advanced in Books Two and Three. In this section, Socrates offers an 'outline of theology' (379a5-6) in order to reform the educational literature of his Kallipolis. Still, the providential gods left for use in this literature can still be called by their proper civic names and must be continuous with those referred to in its religious rituals. But that is all one can say for certain at this juncture. The nature of these new gods is left to us as a task of interpretation.

Readers might reasonably expect to learn more of them in the central metaphysical books' account of their heavenly abode: the realm of Forms. However, despite this section's discussion of these immaterial objects of knowledge, the gods hardly appear at all. As G.M.A. Grube puts it: 'When the Ideas are fully developed, we get the impression that they and the gods are never on the stage at the same time'. Some scholars have thus concluded that although

Plato is willing to retain morally-uplifting, fictional talk of all-good gods for the children and non-philosophers of his Kallipolis, when he turns to the serious business of educating his philosophers he reveals that the only true divinities are the Forms. I will argue that this reading is too extreme, and will spell out the place of the *Republic* in the Platonic reformation by paying close attention to the role it assigns piety and the gods.