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# The Trials of Socrates and Jesus Christ: A Comparison

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## **Abstract**

*History records many controversial trials in which religious issues have been involved. In 399 BC Socrates was tried and condemned in Athens for introducing strange gods and corrupting the Athenian youth. The case was presented by Plato and Xenophon as a travesty of justice, with Socrates as a martyr to truth against superstition and prejudice. The trial of Jesus Christ of Nazareth is viewed by many as the most notable in world history and its effect on human history has been incalculable. The spiritual significance of the trial and death of Jesus is dramatically presented in the four gospels and although the nature of this significance is hard to define with exactness since the gospels are narratives and not theological treatises, it may fairly be described as residing in the evaluation of the trial and death of Jesus as the vicarious sacrifice of the son of God for humanity. Socrates' relentless pursuit of truth and irritating habit of pointing out the ignorance of others led to his trial and death and as considered by many, in this respect he foreshadowed the life and death of Jesus. By accepting the hemlock rather than submitting to exile, Socrates demonstrated that he shared both the mission and the final destiny of the prophets and the righteous.*

## **I**

Comparisons are quite common to various disciplines and traditions and in the histories of spiritual movements or religions, this type of comparative enterprise has traditionally focussed on figures who have come to be included in the "founder of a movement" category. For obvious reasons in the current article I do not offer a comprehensive analysis or interpretation of the trials of Socrates and Jesus Christ. My intention is to highlight certain views, similarities and differences pertaining to the trials of both these, perceived by many, as legendary personalities and compelling figures.

Socrates and Jesus have often been compared and Socrates has been

called a forerunner of Jesus. The points of likeness between their trials and the reasons for which they were condemned are striking and have been fully recognised. However sometimes the more one thinks about the last days of these two men, the more profound appear the differences; four hundred years separated them; one was an Athenian and the other a Jew; the one was guided by his clear, detached intellect, the other inherited the spiritual intensity of the Hebrew prophets; one was an old man of seventy who had lived a well-filled life and who said of himself: *Well, Crito, it would be absurd if at my age I were disturbed because I must die now* (Plato, 1947: 153); the other was thirty-four and had apparently failed miserably in his mission as he confided to three disciples closest to him saying to them at the night of his imminent arrest and trial: *My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death. Stay here and watch with me. "Matthew 26:38"*. That Jesus aimed above all at a moral healing of man and taught it most effectively by His own death has always been the principal reason for drawing a parallel between him and Socrates (Wauchope, 1932).

## II

There are two descriptions of the trial and death of Socrates written by disciples with great literary powers namely Xenophon and Plato. They are in substantial agreement but Xenophon was away for two years on the March of the Ten Thousand to Babylon and only returned to Athens after the death of Socrates. He quotes thus the testimony of their common friend Hermogenes. On the other hand Plato was present at the trial and reports the proceedings in the *Apology*, the *Crito* and the *Phaedo*. For the trial and death of Jesus we have, first the Synoptic Gospels and then also the account of St John which may be compared with that of Plato, since both are coloured by the imagination of the writer, true to the spirit, rather than accurate in literal detail. Additional sources include the *Gospel of Peter*, the *Acts of Peter*, the *Acts of Thomas* and others. Pertaining to the trial of Jesus, Crossan (1995: 117) holds the view that it was entirely based on prophecy historicised rather than history remembered. It was not only the content of the trial but the very fact of the trial or trials that he considers to be unhistorical. He goes through the different versions of the passion narrative in detail – arrest, trial, abuse, execution, burial, and resurrection. Eventually, he suggests the possible conclusion that in the case of Jesus there may well have been arrest and execution but no trial whatsoever in-between. Crossan's reconstruction is complex if not contrived and the extent to which this is counterbalanced by its explanatory power is debatable if not highly problematic. The real issue, however, is its relative deceptive persuasiveness compared to alternatives.

Socrates and Jesus stirred the minds and consciences of their contemporaries, unsettled them with regard to the established religion, and taught a simpler and higher morality. Each claimed to be acting under divine inspiration. Socrates was convinced that his mission was imposed upon him by God, and believed in a spirit or daemon *a sort of voice that comes to me and, when it comes, it always holds me back, but never urges me forward* and in the words of Martin Heidegger he was the purest thinker of the West (Heidegger, 1954: xvii). The relationship of Jesus to spiritual guidance was closer as narrated by his disciple John: *I and My Father are one* "John 10:30" and *As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father so he who feeds on Me will live because of Me* "John 6:57" while Benedict Spinoza (1955) speaks of Him as the truest symbol of heavenly wisdom. It is probably a measure of their power that their trials and subsequent deaths became inevitable.

The most popular argument held by contemporary commentators, including Vlastos (1971) and Stone (1988), claims that Socrates' association with Critias and Alcibiades formed the central motivation for his conviction and execution. Vlastos uses the works of Polycrates, Xenophon and Aeschines to support his assertion. Other commentators such as Burnett (1914) find proof of the argument within Plato's Socratic texts, most notably the *Apology* and *Meno*. Despite essential disagreement, these commentators bring to our attention the fact that the motivations postulated for Socrates' conviction and execution are based primarily upon the arguments of three classical figures namely Xenophon (*Memorabilia* and *Defense*), Polycrates (*Accusations*), and Plato (*Apology*, *Gorgias*, and *Meno*). Thus the explanation of the attack made on Socrates is simple. He had been on terms of close friendship with the two men whose memories were most obnoxious to the democrats: Critias, the fiercest spirit among the extremists of the *terror* of 404; and Alcibiades, whose self-will had done so much to bring about the downfall of the Athenian empire. In 415 BC, on the night before the Athenian fleet was about to set sail for Syracuse during the Peloponnesian War undertaking the Sicilian Expedition, all of the Athenian *hermai* were vandalized. This was a horribly impious act and many people believed it threatened the success of the expedition. Though it was never proven, the Athenians at the time believed it was the work of saboteurs, either from Syracuse or anti-war doves from Athens itself. In fact, Alcibiades was accused of being the originator of the crime. He denied the accusations and offered to stand trial, but the Athenians did not want to disrupt the expedition any further. His opponents were eager to have Alcibiades' trial in his absence when he could not defend himself. Once he had left on the expedition, his political enemies had him charged and sentenced to death in absentia, both for the mutilation of the herms, and the supposedly related crime of profaning the Eleusinian Mysteries. The

charge of *educating Alcibiades* was made prominent in the pamphlet written a few years after the trial by the sophist Polycrates, in justification of the verdict. More than half a century later, the orator Aeschines reminds his audience that Socrates had been put to death because he was believed to have educated Critias. In fact, it was absurd to make Socrates responsible for the ambitions of Alcibiades, and, as he reminded his judges, he had disobeyed an illegal order from Critias and his colleagues at the risk of his life. But it is natural that he should have had to suffer for the crimes of both men, the more so because he had been a severe critic of democracy and of the famous democratic leaders and furthermore he had not, like the advanced democrats, withdrawn from Athens during the reign of the Thirty Tyrants known as already stated the period of *terror*. Socrates was actually suspected of using great abilities and gifts to pervert his younger associates from loyalty to the principles of democracy, and the convinced democrats who had recovered the city in 403 were unwilling, as J Burnet (1915) has said, to leave their work at the mercy of reaction. It is sometimes said that Socrates was the first person in the West to be convicted for his beliefs namely thought crime or a crime of conscience and not believing in the gods of the Athenians is exactly that. In classical Athens, however, religion was a matter of public participation under law, regulated by a calendar of festivals in honour of a variety of deities, with new ones introduced from time to time. The *polis* used its revenues to maintain temples and shrines, to finance festivals and it prescribed consultation with Apollo's oracle at Delphi in times of important decisions or crises. Furthermore no ordained dogma or articles of faith were required and therefore compliance was measured by behaviour. Socrates divided the accusations against him into old and new and addressed them in that order. However his relentless honesty, easily mistaken by the jury as arrogance, created doubt on his various claims that a) he will do no wrong, even to avoid death b) he does not fear death c) he will never cease to do philosophy, to examine himself and others, even for the promise of acquittal d) he is god's greatest gift to the city e) his accusers cannot harm him and f) the jurors will harm themselves if they kill him. He went on to describe himself as the city's benefactor maintaining that he mistreated no one deserving thus a reward and not punishment. At the end of his apology he offers his friends the privilege of paying a fine of minae which was six times his net worth. He is sentenced to death and reflects that it may be a blessing, either a dreamless sleep or an opportunity to converse in the underworld. Socrates' trial was no evil conspiracy against an innocent, but something more profound and at the same time more tragic – a catastrophic mistake, a misunderstanding that could not be reconciled in the time allowed by the law (Ahbel-Rappe & Kamtekar, 2006).

Pertaining to the trial of Jesus the gospels point to different sources of

initial concern among the Jewish authorities. The synoptic gospel accounts (Mark, Matthew, and Luke) report that Jesus was brought first to face charges before Jewish authorities. Whether the proceedings – probably before the Sanhedrin, functioning as a court – is better described as a trial or as a preliminary investigation is a matter of debate among scholars. The fact that Jewish leaders played at least some role in the execution of Jesus is confirmed by the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus who wrote in the first-century as follows: *At this time there was a wise man who was called Jesus. And his conduct was good, and he was known to be virtuous. And many people from among the Jews and other nations became his disciples. Pilate condemned him to be crucified and to die. And those who had become his disciples did not abandon his discipleship. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion and that he was alive; accordingly, he was perhaps the Messiah concerning whom the prophets have recounted wonders* (Josephus, 1934 & internet website). Mark indicates that Jesus faced the charge of blasphemy, but nothing in Mark indicates that Jesus said anything that would actually constitute blasphemy under Jewish law. Moreover, Mark's account is questionable in that had a trial before the Sanhedrin taken place as he described, it most likely would have been illegal under Jewish law. Unless Jewish law of the time differed from what we know of it a century later, the trial could not have taken place at night and would have required two separate hearings. The most likely scenario seems to be that Jesus faced some initial questioning by Caiaphas and other Jewish leaders, probably concerning his actions and statements at the Temple, and that he was then handed over to Pontius Pilate for punishment. Mark suggests that the Jewish authorities were concerned primarily with the confrontation Jesus had with traders in the Temple, while Luke's account identifies their primary concern as his teachings in the Temple. John, meanwhile, points to a fear among Jewish authorities that Jesus' rising popularity could lead to an uprising that would provoke a violent response from Rome. All four Biblical accounts agree, however, that Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin ultimately condemned Jesus for blasphemy. The gospels record that when Caiaphas asked Jesus whether he claimed to be the Messiah, he replied: *I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power and coming with the clouds of heaven* (Mark 14:62) or *You have said so "Matthew 26:64"* or *If I tell you, you will not believe "Luke 22:67-8"* or *You say that I am "John 19:7"*). Blasphemy according to Jewish law is not mere profanity. It is an insult directed against God – a sort of treason against the Deity. This is one of the crimes that has given ecclesiastical judges throughout history wide latitude and great scope to give vent to their passions. The offence of blasphemy was a very necessary part of the Hebraic law because the Hebrew commonwealth was in theory a theocracy. All its priests, prophets, judges and kings were considered to have

been mere attendants and ministers of the invisible King whose word was Israel's constitution and law. The verbal renunciation of God was in the strict sense high treason, and any attempt to subvert the institutions of his government was constructive treason and thus blasphemy. Although the Mishnah, the Jewish lawcode assembled around 200 A. D., defined blasphemy more narrowly as speaking the sacred name of God (YHWH), the gospel writers suggest a looser first-century construction of the term, one that includes a variety of serious theological offenses. In the case of Jesus it is also questionable how far the Hebrew trial conformed to the practice of the time and at any rate it seems to have been rushed, owing to the near approach of the Passover. To civilised humans it appears atrocious and horrifying that a person should be arrested one night, tried during the night and early morning, and executed at noon. It is also the brutality of the treatment of Jesus, even more than the apparent injustice of the verdict, which horrifies many - the haste and disorder, the hooting and mocking, the blows and derision, and the terrible scourging which was, it seems, usual before crucifixion. In these matters the trial of Socrates was governed by Greek restraint. Socrates was the dominating figure at his trial, he appeared to be in command of the court, to lead the argument in his own way and almost to invite the sentence by aggravating the Athenian jury. Jesus was also the dominating figure, but by the power of His silence in the face of accusation and insults. He was led from one examination to another, battered and disdained, a lonely figure in a shoving multitude of enemies, yet, in the few words He spoke, He rose in people's views to heights immeasurably beyond His judges, and some would say in mystical intensity, equally beyond Socrates. This can be also attributed to the apostle Paul's interpretation of the trial and death of Jesus in a primarily esoteric manner. This interpretation occurs in a letter written to his Christian disciples in the Greek city of Corinth as he writes to them: *However, we speak wisdom among those who are mature, yet not the wisdom of this age, nor of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. But we speak the wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory, which none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory* (I Corinthians 2:6-8). Here Jesus is identified with a supernatural being described as the 'Lord of glory' and his trial and subsequent crucifixion are viewed as the work of demonic rulers. And these rulers had been deceived by God into perpetrating the crime, evidently to their own detriment.



Several modern interpreters have viewed the trial of Socrates as the result of a tragic collision between two defensible positions. According to Hegel as

quoted by Colaiaco (2001:4) the essence of tragedy is a conflict not so much between characters but between viewpoints, each rational and justifiable, yet lacking a more comprehensive vision that would have encompassed the good in the opposite side. In the words of Romano Guardini (1948: 142) *The truth that must be emphasized again and again, is that here an epoch - a declining one, it is true, but still full of values - confronts a man who, great as he is and called to be a bringer of new things, disrupts by his spirit the status quo. In the incompatibility of these two opposing sets of values and forces lies the real tragedy of the situation.* Naturally those who see merit in both sides usually hold that Socrates, although morally superior, was legally guilty. J B Bury as quoted by Colaiaco (2001: 5) puts it as follows: *Socrates was not condemned unjustly – according to the law. And that is the intensity of the tragedy. There have been no better men than Socrates; yet his accusers were perfectly right.* The execution of Socrates was the protest of the spirit of the old order against the growth of individualism. The conflict between Socrates and Athens was not between absolute good and evil. To see Socrates as an example of a perfectly innocent individual crushed by a tyrannical state is to reduce the trial to a mere morality play. In defence of the polis of Athens, history has shown that even the best societies sometimes betray their principles. In fact, placed in a similar situation, with one's fundamental values and beliefs under assault in a time of crisis, many people today would probably vote to condemn Socrates. By bringing the philosophic mission into the court, Socrates converted his trial into a moral examination of Athens, sealing his fate. The trial demonstrated for many Athenians the incompatibility between philosophy and politics. And as he declared to the jury, a life worth living is guided not by the prospects of life or death, or by public opinion, but by whether one is doing right or wrong, acting justly or unjustly. According to Colaiaco (2001:227), it was Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (X.vii.8) who conveyed in the most appropriate way what Socrates represents for those who hold dear the life of the mind. *But such a life would be too high for man; for it is not in so far as he is man that he will live so, but in so far as something divine is present in him... If reason is divine, then, in comparison with man, the life according to it is divine in comparison with human life. But we must not follow those who advise us, being men, to think of human things, and, being mortal, of mortal things, but must, so far as we can, make ourselves immortal, and strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in us; for even if it be small in bulk, much more does it in power and worth surpass everything.* Socrates' dictum *the unexamined life is not worth living* is admittedly frowned upon by many moral philosophers working in the academies of today but to a large part of the modern world, his call to self-examination earned him a place close to that of Jesus Christ

and other religious leaders who were regarded as the great moral paradigms of human existence.

In the trial of Jesus there is no normal proven charge of criminal behaviour against him, yet a call for death causes rhetorical tension in his hearings. The uncertainty of the charges against Jesus and the unique aura emanating from his person are complicated by hearings before different people with different jurisdictions. In attempting to understand the theological and political implications of what Jesus says and does, it becomes evident that Jesus is concerned with a view of man as changed through his summoned, new relationship to God. This personal-political theme of Jesus' indictment indeed eminently religious but not speculatively dogmatic may turn out to be more radical and more demanding upon humans than what they may think or anticipate. Since rhetoric, political philosophy, and jurisprudence are intertwined in this political trial, it is humanly speaking not abundantly clear by whom Jesus was tried, or for what charge. His trial is twofold. At its first part before the Sanhedrin, he appears before a judiciary body which is convinced a priori that Jesus is religiously and politically dangerous, upsetting the status quo in both spheres. It attempts in an awkward way to find the right charges which must be not only theological – for to claim to be the Messiah is not a civil crime – but also political – in order to involve Pilate who is present in Jerusalem for the Passover. The initial attempt at a charge is Jesus' attack on the temple. This charge is weak, although to prophesy the destruction of the temple had been a serious crime at the time of Jeremiah the prophet. The witnesses do not agree on what Jesus said as political trials are usually built around an inner truth, basically dangerous but distorted into a shocking threat. The gospels mention that Jesus verbally "attacked" the temple metaphorically (referring to the temple of his body which would be destroyed) or prophetically. The accused is next asked if he is the promised, central figure of the Jewish religion - the Messiah, but he is also questioned through a theological term which is simultaneously political namely the king of the Jews. According to Kilpatrick (1953) the proceedings had to serve two purposes. First they had to provide an established charge which would unite all important parties in the Sanhedrin in the conviction that according to Jewish law the prisoner was guilty and liable to the death penalty. Secondly, a charge had to be found which would carry conviction with Pilate. The evidence about the saying on destroying the Temple was to serve the first purpose. It is noticeable that at this point in the trial witnesses were summoned. If the High Priest's examination is correctly interpreted, the messianic interrogation served the second purpose. Pilate is not interested in pursuing the non-political dimension into what this kingdom might be, a kingdom of truth. However "kingdom" and "truth" mean much more for



Jesus than abstractions. They are symbols for a new way of living in the pulse of history, within life and beyond physical death and for this he is willing to be found guilty. At a particular moment of time Jesus says the power over him from above shows that Pilate's power is not absolute. His trial is in this sense the trial of a man in and for the new era, not the trial of God. The political and religious converge in Jesus' anthropology as well as his theology. Jesus' preaching challenges the status quo by reintroducing the dynamic forward movement of history in which something within and above man is breaking in. He called it the kingdom, referring to God's authority and rule as he turned the eyes of people towards a better present and future. The Fatherhood of the omnipotent God corresponded not only to simple trust but to mature faith realized in active hope and love. Human dignity and participation in the kingdom rested upon the deepest human responses and benedictions of a person, not upon class, wealth, or ecclesiastical position. Above all, Jesus preached that there were only two absolutes, and they were neither the temple nor the state. The two absolutes were God and man's new relationship - as son and adult - to God as loving Father and co-working Spirit.

#### IV

In the case of both Jesus and Socrates the essence of their moral integrity was not specifically or concretely defined – or more appropriately expressed – their stories made it possible for many to seek and redefine their own ideas, their own ethical content and thus develop their own ethical role model. What is common to these two figures, and also abstract – namely what can be interpreted from any concrete, ethical and social standpoint – is the purposeful, consistent living out of one's own life, the acceptance of all moral consequences and of whatever destiny may bring, up to and including a martyr's death, the complete harmony of conduct and teaching, and finally the plain, everyday character of their lives. In the theme of martyrdom, likewise common to both, the note of a subjective morality can often be sensed. There is no question here, of only the fulfilment of some divine destiny, but also of a stand taken against the majority of men and their prejudices, and against the decadence of prevailing morality. Their teaching lends the lives of both men a public character, without disturbing the basic conception of them as moralists. It is not a matter of ideas, but of the readiness to make ideas effective – and whether one teaches in the agora at Athens or amidst a circle of chosen disciples in Judea is immaterial. Finally, as to the plain, everyday character of their lives, both Socrates and Jesus, as human ideal figures, are democratic. To some intellectuals Socrates ceases to be the 'sage' or the 'guru' just as Jesus also

ceases to be the 'Son of God'; each of them is only one among the sons of men. Their teachings do not represent wisdom in any learned sense, but rather in the moral sense of the word, and thus their wisdom speaks to everyone while their way is open to every human being. To some theologians, Socrates is regarded as the first pre-Christ Christian for by accepting the hemlock rather than submitting to exile, Socrates proved that he shared both the mission and the final destiny of the prophets and the righteous while Jesus is regarded by them as God's wisdom, righteousness, holiness and redemption. In this respect spirituality and theology have always been preoccupied with the limits of rationality and intelligibility as many scholars were concerned with intellectual limits, and it is more common to quote than to give serious attention to Immanuel Kant's confession: *I have found it necessary to deny knowledge, in order to make room for faith* (Kant, 1961: 29). From the philosophical perspective maybe a fitting close to both Socrates and Jesus' trials and deaths, is the view held by Helen Gardner (1948) that humans are not to think of a martyr as primarily one who suffers for a cause, or who gives up his life for truth, but as a witness to the awesome or awful reality of the supernatural.

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