“’The Most Important Thing of All’: Piety, Virtue, and Politics in Plato’s *Laws*”
Dissertation by Aimée Koeplin

Abstract:

In book X of Plato’s *Laws*, the Athenian warns the young heretic, “The most important thing of all… is to get the right idea about the gods and so live a good life – otherwise you’ll live a bad one.” (888b3-4) It is not clear, however, just why Plato thinks that one must have true beliefs about the gods in order to live a good life. Plato has explained in the earlier books that all citizens will undergo a strict character education that begins in childhood and continues into adulthood. This training will habituate the character for a life of *sôphrosunê* and the other virtues. Yet, in book X, the Athenian insists that all citizens hold true theological beliefs in addition to receiving a thorough character education. In fact, the Athenian prescribes the death penalty for persistent atheism. But why should these beliefs be so important? What does piety contribute to virtue?

I argue that, in the *Laws*, to hold true theological beliefs is to have insight into the nature of the good. True theological belief is more than a mere stabilizing force for virtue; piety is a necessary part of virtue. While character training teaches citizens to love the good and hate the bad, theology gives citizens rational insight into the nature of the good. The insight that piety provides is two-fold. First, understanding theology involves understanding the order and goodness of the cosmos. This shows the citizen that one’s own good relies on the good of the city and of the cosmos as a whole. So, to seek one’s own private advantage at the expense of others is a losing proposition. Second, understanding theology involves understanding that the soul is more valuable than any material goods. So, one should honor one’s soul above one’s body or other possessions. This account of piety as understanding the good allows us to make sense of the Athenian’s insistence on a law against impiety. Such a law fits in with the professed aim of the state: to make citizens as virtuous as possible.