Christian support for the empire

**Name of the author:** Athenagoras of Athens  
**Date:** 176 CE to 178 CE  
**Place:** Athens  
**Language:** Greek  
**Category:** Christian  
**Literary genre:** Apologetic and Rhetorical treatise

**Title of work:** Supplication for the Christians  
**Reference:** XXXII  
**Commentary:**  
For a general introduction to Athenagoras and the Supplication for the Christians, please see the commentary on I.1-3.

The present passage from the end of the *Supplication for the Christians* has Athenagoras lavish praise upon his imperial addressees in a final attempt to win them over to his way of thinking. In acknowledgement of Marcus Aurelius’s famous Stoic philosophical persuasion, Athenagoras refers to him and Lucius Aurelius Commodus as philosophers in the opening of his apology (see the commentary on chapter XIII), and frequently characterises Christianity as a reasoned philosophy throughout the text. Grant suggests that it might be more than rhetorical convention which prompts Athenagoras to mention imperial intelligence and devotion to philosophy a total of six times and two times respectively in the course of his apology. Perhaps he was aware of rumours that Commodus lacked intelligence, and wanted to assure his addressees that this was not an opinion he shared (Cassius Dio, *Roman History* LXXIII.1.2, reports of the young Commodus that his ignorance and simplicity made him easy to manipulate; on the contrary, Marcus Aurelius himself, in his *Meditations* I.17.4 states that he is glad his children were born neither deformed nor lacking in intelligence) (see Grant, *Greek Apologists*, p. 101-102). It remains uncertain to what degree factors other than rhetorical style determined the emphasis Athenagoras places on the intelligence of his addressees. Having appealed to this particular aspect of the emperor’s character, this final appeal strengthens Athenagoras’s assurance that Christianity is not a dangerous superstition by showing that he, as a representative of the Christians, wishes nothing but good things for the Roman empire and its leaders. Indeed, Athenagoras acknowledges the learnedness of his addressees by commenting here that their qualities stem both from their “nature” (?????, *phusis*) and their education (???????*, paideia*). He also acknowledges their worthiness and their right to rule, which was a popular technique of early Christian authors who wanted to make clear that Christianity was not hostile to the Roman government, and therefore not likely to cause disruption (see also, for example, *1 Clement* 60.4-61.3; Romans 13:1-7; *1 Peter* 2:17).

The rhetorical implication of Athenagoras’s flattery of his addressees’ intelligence and general good character is that being reasonable men, having heard Athenagoras’s defence of Christianity against its accusers, they will logically be persuaded of its legitimacy. Athenagoras employs a further tactic in his closing address, however, which seeks to make absolutely clear that Christianity supports Rome’s aims. By appealing to the extreme piety of the Christians (a virtue which was also highly prominent in Roman religion), Athenagoras argues that their prayers can be of extreme benefit to the Roman government, and for this reason it is worthwhile for the emperor to ensure that Christians are not treated badly. Athenagoras endeavours to tempt his imperial audience by appealing to the Roman desire for expansion, wealth, and dominion over all peoples. If the Christians are allowed to practice their religion in peace, he suggests, then Rome might benefit also if God heeds the requests of the likes of Athenagoras, which he promises in return for the emperor’s help with the way Christians are viewed and treated by their non-Christian neighbours. The observable benefits of Christian prayer for the Roman empire was something that other writers also drew upon. For instance, Tertullian lists various occasions on which Christianity has aided the Roman army and its emperors in his *To Scapula IV.5-6*, and argues for the mutual beneficence of invoking God’s continual support for the emperor and the empire’s growth in his *Apology XXX* and *XXXII*. *Melito of Sardis* argues along similar lines, That Christian teachings were supportive of the Roman government and its right to rule was not a new argument; however, what is particularly striking in Athenagoras’s conclusion to his apology is the boldness with
which he tries to tempt his imperial audience into seeing Christianity as a tool to further their expansive aims, even if as Grant argues, it is unlikely that the apology was ever actually delivered to Marcus Aurelius and Commodus (Greek Apologists, p. 100).

In his Roman Oration, which is thought to have been delivered to Antoninus Pius in either 143 or 154 CE, the Greek orator Aelius Aristides celebrates Roman imperial rule. The oration expounds on the civil and military achievements of Rome, the benefits to its subjects, notably Roman citizenship, and the Pax Romana. Aelius Aristides also analyses the reasons for Roman power and hegemony, such as the emperor, Rome’s mixed constitution, the army, and Roman administration. William Schoedel has argued that Athenagoras is “as striking in [his] idealization of Roman power” as Aelius Aristides (“Christian ‘Atheism’,” p. 317). Schoedel rightly notes, however, that while Aelius Aristides can be effulgent in his praise for the empire, Athenagoras has to consider the mistreatment of Christians in his writing, and so solves this problem by presenting harassment of Christians as an anomaly in Roman religious policy. Interesting in connection with Athenagoras’s argument in the present passage is the claims by Aelius Aristides that “for the eternal duration of this empire the whole civilized world prays all together, emitting, like an aulos after a thorough cleaning, one note with more perfect precision than a chorus; so beautifully is it harmonized by the leader in command” (Roman Oration XXIX). Athenagoras’s insistence that Christians pray for the Roman government and the increase of the empire chimes with Aelius Aristides’s statement that the whole oikoumenè joins together in prayer for the empire’s continuation. Indeed, Athenagoras assures his imperial audience that Christians, being every bit a part of the empire as any of its other subjects, naturally wish to enjoy the Roman peace and other benefits of empire in the same way as anyone else. This sense of unity within the empire is something which the Roman Oration and Athenagoras make very clear, praising the Roman ability to extend its sway far and wide, drawing in and submitting all peoples. In Athenagoras’s understanding, the Christians, while not a distinct ethnic group, are a people who form an integral part of the empire, and wish to enjoy a mutually advantageous relationship with it.

Keywords in the original language:

- ???????
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Thematic keywords in English:

- imperial dynasty
- Pax Romana
- peace
- piety
- Roman emperor
- Roman expansion
- Roman government
- stability
- submission

Bibliographical references: Grant, Robert M., Greek Apologists of the Second Century (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988)
Rankin, David, Athenagoras: Philosopher and Theologian (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2009)
Athenagoras of Athens, *Supplication for the Christians XIII*

Why the Christians will not sacrifice to the gods

- Read more about Athenagoras of Athens, *Supplication for the Christians XIII*

Aelius Aristides, *The Roman Oration (extracts)*

Praise of the Roman Empire

- Read more about Aelius Aristides, *The Roman Oration (extracts)*

Tertullian, *To Scapula II.6-8*

Praise for the emperor

- Read more about Tertullian, *To Scapula II.6-8*

Tertullian, *Apology XXX*

The nature of Christian prayer for the emperor

- Read more about Tertullian, *Apology XXX*

Tertullian, *Apology XXXII*

It is in Christianity’s interests to pray for the emperor

- Read more about Tertullian, *Apology XXXII*

Christianity has benefitted the Roman empire


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