



[Marcus Minucius Felix, Octavius VI](#)

Roman religious practice is specifically tailored towards its expansionist aims

Name of the author: Marcus Minucius Felix

Date: 3d CE

Place: Rome

Language: Latin

Category: Christian

Literary genre: Apologetic

Title of work: Octavius

Reference: VI

Commentary:

The *Octavius* gives an account of a debate, apparently mediated by Minucius Felix, between Octavius Januarius, a Christian convert, and Q. Caecilius Natalis, a pagan (there was a magistrate of this name at Cirta, in North Africa, in around 210 CE, where Minucius Felix is thought to have come from originally). While it is not known for certain whether the dialogue reflects a historical debate or is merely a rhetorical exercise, Graeme Clarke argues that the situating of a debate on a leisure trip (the present text claims to be based on a debate which took place while on a leisure trip to Ostia, just outside of Rome; see chapter II) was a common literary convention at the time (“Historical Setting”). It is generally accepted that it was written in Rome in the early part of the third century CE, when the empire was recovering from the civil wars of 193-197 CE. While the battles were fought elsewhere, such as in Asia Minor, Syria, and Gaul, Rome itself saw much conflict of a political nature, and battles for imperial supremacy (see David Rankin, *From Clement to Origen*, p. 42). Gerald Rendall dates the text after the publication of Tertullian’s *Apology* at the end of the second century CE, which shares striking similarities (including some common material) with the *Octavius*, meaning that scholars have debated which preceded and influenced the other (*Minucius Felix*, p. 307).

Both Lactantius and Jerome (*Divine Institutes* V.1.21; *On Illustrious Men* LVIII) tell us that Minucius Felix was a prominent Christian advocate in Rome. His style and vocabulary are taken from Cicero and Seneca, and the dialogical formula of the *Octavius* follows the established model for this type of writing, especially that found in Cicero (e.g. *On the Nature of the Gods*, which features a dialogue between speakers from three different schools of philosophy). While the text is largely protreptic (a piece of literature with the aim of persuading its audience), it is apologetic in that it gives Christians responses to and arguments against pagan criticisms of their beliefs (Rankin, *From Clement to Origen*, p. 44). It is not only the style which mirrors Cicero and Seneca; as Clarke argues, V.6 presents Caecilius’s scepticism as overcome essentially by Stoic argumentation (*The Octavius of Minucius Felix*, p. 184 n. 42), and Cicero’s influence is also seen in the description of cosmic order brought about by a supreme Creator (XVII contains an almost direct mirroring of *On the Nature of the Gods* II.115 and II.27.95, for instance). This focus on order in the universe also mirrors *1 Clement*, which employs a discussion of proper order and hierarchy to justify Christian honouring of the Roman authorities (see [1 Clement 37.1-5](#); [60.4-61.3](#)) (see Rankin, *From Clement to Origen*, p. 45).

Clarke argues that the heavily philosophical tone of the Christian tenets outlined in the text, and its “lack of nervous urgency” allow it to fit nicely into the “philosophically-inclined atmosphere and the largely tolerant context of Severan Rome” (“Historical Setting,” p. 280). During this period, Christians in Rome at least were relatively free from persecution, and the author of the *Octavius* certainly seems to have felt secure enough to write a piece which had the central aim of persuading pagans to convert to Christianity (see Rankin, *From Clement to Origen*, p. 43). In this sense, the *Octavius* has a markedly different tone to the apologetic writings of previous Christian authors, who wished for imperial rulers to simply grant Christians a reprieve from ill treatment. Minucius Felix’s polemic does not arise from Christian maltreatment, however; rather, he seeks to present an argument convincing all to adopt the Christian religion, which he shows in the course of the dialogue to be vastly superior to traditional Roman religion. This said, the text does offer some critique of imperial practices and the imperial cult, despite these not being the main focus of the text. Section XXXIII.1, for instance, appears to compare the emperor unfavourably to God, stating that unlike God, the emperor is only as powerful as his weakest official. The imperial cult is condemned, for



example, at XXXII.1, XXIII.9, and XXIV.3, where it is claimed that the dead cannot logically be considered divine, as gods are not capable of dying (see Rankin, *From Clement to Origen*, p. 43).

Minucius Felix's engagement with the city of Rome, from where he writes, and his understanding of Rome's history and the way in which Rome itself interprets its history, are very apparent in the text. The present extract contains the pagan Caecilius's argument for the value of Roman religion, which he argues has enabled the expansion and wealth of the Roman empire. Caecilius begins by praising the merits of ancestral tradition, which was at the centre of Roman religion. Emphasis is placed on the importance of revering the deities whom one's fathers and forefathers honoured; the continuation of worship down the generations of particular gods is seen as a sign of stability. However, Caecilius attributes Rome's success partly to its open policy concerning deities. Caecilius explains that history shows that empire, provinces, and cities each have their own religious traditions, with the Romans employing an inclusive attitude towards the gods that they are willing to worship. It is this attitude of openness to various divinities that Caecilius argues has allowed the Romans to assert power and authority over "the circuit of the whole world," enabling its power and influence to spread "beyond the paths of the sun, and the bounds of the ocean." The Romans, he suggests, possess a "religious valour" which protects their cities through the continued practice of sacred rites (chaste virgins likely refer to the Vestal Virgins, who were responsible for guarding the fire which burned in the temple of Vesta in Rome; if the flame went out, it was understood as a bad omen).

It is claimed that the Romans remain steadfast in their piety where others would fail, not abandoning the gods in the face of adversity. Their piety is such that the Gauls are said to marvel at "the audacity of their (the Romans') superstition." Particularly significant, however, is that even during the "fury of victory" the Romans are willing to acknowledge foreign gods of nations which they have conquered, and incorporate them into their own pantheon. This attitude to religion, as far as Caecilius is concerned, is a vital tool to Roman success. Rather than foolishly restricting themselves, the Romans are open to the possibility that gods previously unknown to them may be of use if venerated properly. This acceptance of "the sacred institutions of all nations" is what has been rewarded with the dominion that Rome now enjoys over the world. In chapter [XXV](#), the Christian Octavius responds to such claims of Roman piety by arguing that Rome owes its power and increase not to religious observance, but to brutality and impiety which stretches right back to the time of Romulus.

Keywords in the original language:

- [antiquitas](#)
- [auctoritas](#)
- [audacia](#)
- [caerimonia](#)
- [Capitolium](#)
- [ferocio](#)
- [fortuna](#)
- [gens](#)
- [gentilis](#)
- [honor](#)
- [hostilis](#)
- [imperium](#)
- [manes](#)
- [municeps](#)
- [Natura](#)
- [potestas](#)
- [provincialis](#)
- [regnum](#)
- [religio](#)
- [religiosus](#)
- [rex](#)
- [ritus](#)
- [Romanus](#)
- [sacer](#)



- [sacerdos](#)
- [saeculum](#)
- [sanctitas](#)
- [superstitio](#)
- [universus](#)
- [urbs](#)
- [venerabilis](#)
- [victoria](#)
- [virtus](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [altar](#)
- [ancestors](#)
- [authority](#)
- [Capitol](#)
- [empire](#)
- [honour](#)
- [local god](#)
- [piety](#)
- [priest](#)
- [province](#)
- [religious rite](#)
- [Roman expansion](#)
- [Roman piety](#)
- [Roman power](#)
- [superstition](#)
- [temple](#)
- [victory](#)

Bibliographical references: Rankin, David Ivan, [*From Clement to Origen: The Social and Historical Context of the Church Fathers*](#) (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006)

Clarke, Graeme W., [“The Historical Setting of the Octavius of Minucius Felix”](#), *Journal of Religious History* 4 (1967) : 267-286

Clarke, Graeme W., [*The Octavius of Marcus Minucius Felix*](#) (New York: Newman Press, 1974)

Other sources connected with this document: Text

[1 Clement 37.1-5](#)

The Roman army as a model for Christian behaviour

- [Read more about 1 Clement 37.1-5](#)

Text

[1 Clement 60.4 – 61.3](#)

God's sanctioning of Roman authorities

- [Read more about 1 Clement 60.4 – 61.3](#)



Text

[Marcus Minucius Felix, Octavius XXV](#)

Roman success is due to ferocity, not religious piety

- [Read more about Marcus Minucius Felix, Octavius XXV](#)

Realized by:

[Kimberley Fowler](#)



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