CHAPTER EIGHT

THE STRUCTURE OF ATHENAGORAS,

SUPPLICATIO PRO CHRISTIANIS

It is generally held that Athenagoras was well versed in Platonism, and the suggestion has been made that he was the person to whom Boethius dedicated a work entitled Difficult Sentences in Plato. Athenagoras’s high admiration for Plato and his use of Platonic vocabulary have contributed to this assessment. So also has the discovery that he was dependent on the Pseudo-Plutarchean De placitis philosophorum. The evaluation of him as a thinker has been affected by these facts. His dependence on handbooks has led to the claim that he lacked originality, a judgment not wholly counterbalanced by the view that he was indeed a Platonist, but that his Platonism was merely the appropriation of philosophically acceptable ideas and terms to express what constituted for him traditional Christian teaching. It has also conversely been claimed that since Athenagoras does not speak of the sacraments, and no soteriology or elaborate Christology

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1 Although the original essay referred to Athenagoras’s Supplicatio pro Christianis, recent scholarship has adopted the standard title of Legatio pro Christianis, which this edition of the essay will employ; despite the change in name, the references to the work remain the same.
4 See the index to Eduard Schwartz, Athenagorae libellus pro Christianis. Oratio de resurrectione cadaverum (TU 4.2; Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1891), 80–143.
Athenagoras was an eclectic thinker, and to determine the nature of his thought the same method must be applied to the study of his thought that is applied to any other eclectic philosopher. In seeking to determine the nature of his Platonism it must be kept in mind that the Platonism with which Athenagoras was familiar was Middle Platonism and that he cannot therefore realistically be measured against Plato himself. Our increasing knowledge of the Platonism of the early Christian centuries has made significant contributions to our understanding of early Christian thought. The purpose of this study is to take a first step towards placing Athenagoras’s *Legatio pro Christianis* in this philosophical context. In particular, the structure of the *Legatio* will be examined for any correspondence it might have to the philosophical literature of his day. The purpose he had for his Apology may be illuminated in this way and may provide the perspective within which his thought should be understood.

**Eclecticism in Athenagoras and Alcinous**

The stated purpose of the *Legatio* is to refute the charges of atheism, cannibalism and incest brought against Christians, and the Apology is

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8 Friedrich Schubring, *Die Philosophie des Athenagoras* (WBPKG; Easter 1882; Berlin: Weidmann, 1882), 4; Richter, *Philosophisches in der Gottes- und Logoslehre*, 4 n. 4.

9 See Johannes H. Loenen, “Albinus’ Metaphysics: An Attempt at Rehabilitation; Part 2: The Sources of Albinus’ Metaphysics,” *Mnemosyne* (Series 4) 10 (1957): 35–56, for the method by which an eclectic philosopher should be studied.

10 According to Richter, *Philosophisches in der Gottes- und Logoslehre*, 4 n. 4, this was already recognized by Ernst W. Möller in his *Geschichte der Kosmologie in der griechischen Kirche bis auf Origenes mit Specialuntersuchungen über die gnostischen Systeme* (Halle: J. Fricke, 1860; repr., Frankfurt: Minerva, 1967), 130, a work that has not been available for this study.