At first sight Athenagoras’s treatment of Christian ethics in his *Legatio pro Christianis* 11 and 12 appears to be anti-philosophical.\(^1\) According to Athenagoras the Christian way of life is based on doctrines taught by God and not by man. Ethical precepts are not derived from dialectical exercises, but are Christian dogmas which come from God and through Scripture (*Leg.* 11.1ff.).\(^2\) The basis for his discussion of Christian ethics is a conflation of Matt 5:44–45 and Luke 6:27–28 (*Leg.* 11.2). This represents a change in his method of argumentation from his earlier theological discussion (*Leg.* 6–10) where he proceeded on the basis of reasoning (λογισμός) which was then confirmed by Scripture (*Leg.* 9.1–3). Furthermore, for him ethics is motivated by a knowledge of the Trinity (*Leg.* 12.3) and is the following of correct knowledge governed by an expectation of the Judgment (*Leg.* 12.1).\(^3\) However, Geffcken\(^4\) and Ubaldi\(^5\) have shown that Athenagoras uses certain philosophical traditions in this discussion, and that his attack on the Sophists was in good philosophical form.\(^6\) This article will examine

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\(^{1}\) Although the original essay referred to Athenagoras’s *Suplicatio 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.


\(^{5}\) Paolo Ubaldi, *La supplica per i Cristiani* (SGC 3; Turin: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1920), 48.

\(^{6}\) It should be noted that Athenagoras describes his royal readers as philosophers in *Leg.* 11.3, a habit he regularly follows when he implicitly represents Christian doctrine as being philosophical. Cf. *Leg.* 2.1, 6; 9.1; 10.2; 17.1; 18.1–2.
Athenagoras’s method of argument to determine more clearly what philosophical models he did in fact use.7

After affirming the divine origin of traditional Christian teaching on ethics, and quoting a passage from the Gospels, Athenagoras states: ἐπιτρέψατε ἐνταῦθα τοῦ λόγου ἐξακούστου μετὰ πολλῆς | κραυγῆς γεγονότος ἐπὶ παρρησίαν ἄναγαγεῖν, ὡς ἐπὶ βασιλέων φιλοσόφων ἀπολογούμενον (Leg. 11.3). The λόγος “that has been cried out so loudly that nobody could fail to hear it”8 is the passage from the Gospels commanding Christians to love their enemies. Proceeding on the basis of this statement, Athenagoras wishes to refer it back to παρρησίαν. His use of the construction ἐπὶ παρρησίαν ἄναγαγεῖν may be explained by his desire to contrast Christian behavior with the logic-chopping of the Sophists. Plato used ἀνάγειν ἐπὶ for referring an argument to its first principle,9 and in Hellenistic writers the construction was used of dialectical demonstration.10 Thus with wry irony Athenagoras wishes to reduce the matter to παρρησία which, on this understanding, assumes greater importance than most scholars ascribe to it. Rather than merely referring to his freedom of speech before the emperors,11 the statement reduces Christian conduct to παρρησία for the emperors who are philosophers.12 The meaning of παρρησία in a philosophical context must be examined to determine its significance for Athenagoras.

Originally a political term for freedom of speech, from Isocrates onwards παρρησία came to be used in a moralistic sense, describing the freedom

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7 Only the main lines of his argument will be traced here. His language betrays his philosophical background throughout. E.g., with the Christians’ purification of themselves (Leg. 11.3; 12.1–3), compare Xenophon, Symp. 1.4.5; Epictetus, Diatr. 2.21.15–16; with the statement that they are escorted through life (Leg. 12.3), compare Marcus Aurelius 2.17; with the proverb that tasting even a small portion of whey and honey will suffice to test the whole (Leg. 12.4), compare Lucian, Hermot. 58ff.

8 So reads the paraphrase by Leslie W. Barnard, “The Embassy of Athenagoras,” VC 21 (1967): 88–92, esp. 92. Barnard’s criticism of other translations of ἐξακούστου μετὰ πολλῆς κραυγῆς is justified, but it is another matter as to whether his interpretation supports the view that Athenagoras addressed the emperors face to face.

9 Plato, Leg. 1.626D. Aristotle, An. Pr. 1.7.29b1–26; 1.32.46b1–47a32 uses ἀνάγειν for reducing a syllogism to one figure.


11 It is regularly understood in this way by translators who do not do justice to ἐπὶ in the translation.

12 Cf. Philo, Flacc. 4, where παρρησία describes someone who shows his mind by actions as well as speech.