Athenagoras shows a high regard for the philosophy and culture of the Greeks. Like the other Apologists, however, he is determined to show that, because it relied on human reason alone, Greek philosophy attained to only partial truth. Athenagoras’s *Legatio pro Christianis* is an exposition of the Christian faith that is carefully organized along the lines of a Middle Platonic epitome of Plato’s philosophy. His thought is frequently illuminated when it is seen against this background, and it is the aim of this essay to examine his assessment of the knowledge of God held by the Greek poets and philosophers from this perspective.

In keeping with a practice of his day, Athenagoras mentions or discusses poets and philosophers in the same context. He attributes their success or failure to attain to a knowledge of God to the degree to which they employed or disregarded the proper dialectic method, which for him is basically a Platonic one.

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.


of the mind which views the intelligibles,⁷ and results in scientific knowledge (ἐπιστήμη).⁸ Stated in a different way, it is the Divine who is the object of contemplation,⁹ and He is perceived by mind and reason alone.¹⁰ For Middle Platonists, this idea was based on *Tim.* 27D–28A¹¹ and *Phaedr.* 274CD.¹² For Athenagoras also, God, who is unbegotten and invisible, is contemplated by mind and reason alone (*Leg.* 4.1).¹³ His source for this idea is *Tim.* 27D (cf. *Leg.* 19.1–2), which is the basis for his insistence that a proper dialectical distinction (διαίρεσις) must be made between what is without beginning and what comes into being, what is the object of the intellect and what the object of sense (e.g., *Leg.* 15.1ff.). As we shall see later, *Phaedr.* 247CD also informs his thinking at significant points.

**Euripides, Other Poets, and the Philosophers’ Use of Allegory to Interpret Myths**

At the beginning of his defense against the charge that Christians are atheists, Athenagoras in the *Legatio* refers to the poets and philosophers (*Leg.* 5.1–3). Using a compendium of quotations from the tragedians, he offers Euripides as an example of the poets and philosophers who had shown scientific interest in God (ἐπιστήσαντες περὶ θεοῦ): Euripides was perplexed about those beings who are unscientifically named gods by common intelligence (ἐπὶ μὲν τῶν κατὰ κοινὴν πρόληψιν ἀνεπιστημόνως ὄνομαξιμένων θεῶν διαπορῶν). When he operated κατὰ κοινὴν πρόληψιν, that is, with those concepts developed in a purely natural manner on the basis

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⁸ Cf. Alcinous, *Didask.* 7.5; Maximus of Tyre 6.1 (p. 65, line 9; p. 66, lines 12–15 Hobein).


¹² See Malherbe, “Structure,” 7 n. 42; 8 n. 44. [*Light*, 2:814 nn. 45 and 47]