



[Arnobius, Against the Pagans VI.26](#)

Roman laws are only necessary because their gods do not exist

Name of the author: Arnobius of Sicca

Date: 297 CE to 310 CE

Place: Sicca Veneria (near Carthage, North Africa)

Language: Latin

Category: Christian

Literary genre: Apologetic and Rhetorical treatise

Title of work: Against the Pagans

Reference: VI.26

Commentary:

For a general introduction to Arnobius and *Against the Pagans*, please see the commentary on [I.5](#).

In this extract from book VI, Arnobius continues in his critique of the reality of the pagan gods, one of the main themes of his treatise. His approach here, however, is to bring into question the morality of the Roman people (on this topic see also [I.64](#)) and argue that if they had any real fear of the gods then their behaviour would not be so out of control. Indeed, Arnobius claims, it is precisely because there is no real belief in the reality of the gods that there is a need for the multitude of laws in existence, which attempt to police the people, but with little success. This builds on the argument of [II.67-68](#), where the temporal and essentially ineffective nature of both the Roman law and the Roman gods is discussed. Arnobius begins by stating that it is foolish to suggest that images and idols were built by ancient people in order to restrain the impious and criminal. It cannot have been the case, he suggests, that the people were so unintelligent that masks (*sanna*) and the thought of frightful, crazed beings (*mania*) were able to scare them like children into abstaining from wicked behaviours. Rather, Arnobius posits that the numerous temples and images of the gods appear to have even had the opposite effect, as despite increased legislation (*lex*) criminality among the people is out of control (behind this statement of course is also the idea that the Roman gods are simply ineffective). IV.34 has already argued that the laws often fail to protect the gods from dishonour, and similarly links the laws to deep-rooted Roman immorality. Here, the point is once again made that the laws have had little effect as a deterrent, just as fear and reverence for the gods has clearly made to difference either.

The insinuation here both about Roman laws and the Roman people is quite damning, and Arnobius presents a hopeless situation whereby the people are thoroughly wicked, leading to more laws and sanctions, which fail to function as desired. He alludes to the terrible punishments which are inflicted upon those who undertake criminal activity, and concludes that the fact that such brutal measures are necessary is further proof that there are no real deities lying behind images and idols. The Roman people, then, as far as Arnobius is concerned, are impious and irreverent because they clearly do not believe strongly enough in the ability of the gods to either punish bad behaviour or reward their piety and virtue. The authorities have therefore been forced to put in place harsher and harsher laws and penalties. Ironically, Arnobius concludes, it is only because the laws are in place that the gods' statues remain largely unharmed and retain at least some honour.

What is implied of course, is that unlike the followers of Roman religion, the Christians have genuine respect for and fear of their God, because they are entirely convinced of his reality. Indeed, Arnobius argues elsewhere (see, for instance, [I.5](#)) that the Christians, though attacked by the pagans, cannot be found guilty of any crimes. In essence, then, Arnobius understands there to be a fundamental difference between the characters of Christians and those worshipping the pagan gods, with Roman law being a necessary consequence of the falseness of the Roman deities.

Keywords in the original language:

- [antiquus](#)



- [civitas](#)
- [deus](#)
- [formo](#)
- [impius](#)
- [iudicium](#)
- [lex](#)
- [mania](#)
- [sanctio](#)
- [sanna](#)
- [templum](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [crime](#)
- [image](#)
- [impiety](#)
- [Roman law](#)
- [Roman people](#)
- [Roman religion](#)
- [temple](#)

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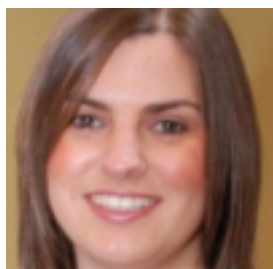
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