



## [Athenagoras of Athens, Supplication for the Christians XIII](#)

Why the Christians will not sacrifice to the gods

**Name of the author:** Athenagoras of Athens

**Date:** 176 CE to 178 CE

**Place:** Athens

**Language:** Greek

**Category:** Christian

**Literary genre:** Apologetic and Philosophical treatise

**Title of work:** Supplication for the Christians

**Reference:** XIII

**Commentary:**

For a general introduction to Athenagoras and the *Supplication for the Christians*, please see the commentary on [I.1-3](#).

The present passage on the issue of sacrifices forms part of Athenagoras's response to the first charge of atheism (which Jews too were accused of because of their denial of Greco-Roman gods and non-sacrificial character. However, Varro, a Roman writer from the early-second century BCE, praises the Jews because of their worship of an imageless God in his *Antiquities*, cited in Augustine, *City of God* IV.31). Athenagoras argues that Christians do not offer blood sacrifices to pagan gods because they worship only one true Deity, and this God does not require his subjects to make such offerings. Athenagoras goes to great poetic lengths to describe why God has no need of blood sacrifices, desiring only the devotion and prayers of his creatures, whom it is important recognise that it is him who is responsible for the creation of the entire cosmos, which he continually sustains in his providence. Athenagoras compares a quotation from Homer's *Iliad* with Romans 12:1, juxtaposing the two attitudes to sacrifices; the former, which affirms the need to sacrifice to the gods, represents Greek culture, which is of course continued in Roman religious practice, while the second, makes clear that such rituals are unnecessary for the God of the Christians. Rather, a "bloodless sacrifice" of "reason" is what is better offered by Christians. This is a logical passage for Athenagoras to draw upon here, with the appeal to "reason" fitting nicely within the broader rhetoric of his apology, and continuing something already hinted at earlier in the extract, where it is stated that "the noblest sacrifice to Him is for us *to know* who stretched out and vaulted the heavens, and fixed the earth in its place." Romans 12:1 calls for the body to be made a "living sacrifice" (?????? ?????, *thusian z?san*), which involves the believer engaging in what is often translated as "spiritual worship," but as Athenagoras has done here, can also be rendered as "*reasoned* (???????, *logikos*) worship."

Philosophical reasoning is a particularly important tactic for Athenagoras, as Marcus Aurelius was famously committed to Stoic philosophy. In acknowledgement of this, Athenagoras refers to Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Aurelius Commodus as philosophers in the opening of his apology (included above the extract from chapter XIII above). It was not only Athenagoras who saw the benefit of making comparisons between Christianity and philosophy given the ideologies of his particular imperial audience. Justin, who wrote his *First Apology* during the reign of Antoninus Pius (138-161 CE), addresses the work directly to the emperor, his adopted son Verissimus the philosopher (a nickname given to Marcus Aurelius), and his other adopted son Lucius Aelius Aurelius Commodus. Justin also appeals to the well-known philosophical sensibilities of his imperial addressees, in addition to referring to their renowned piety, a particularly important virtue to the Romans. Similarly, Athenagoras wishes to show that Christianity is more than superstition, in the hope that outlining its affinities with philosophy might persuade the Stoically-inclined Marcus Aurelius to accept its legitimacy. Grant suggests that it might be more than rhetorical convention, however, which prompts Athenagoras to mention imperial intelligence and devotion to philosophy a total of six times and two times respectively in the course of his apology. Perhaps he was aware of rumours that Commodus lacked intelligence, and wanted to assure his addressees that this was not an opinion he shared (Cassius Dio, *Roman History* LXXIII.1.2, reports of the young Commodus that his ignorance and simplicity made him easy to manipulate; on the contrary, Marcus Aurelius himself, in his *Meditations* I.17.4 states that he is glad his children were born neither deformed nor lacking in intelligence) (see Grant, *Greek Apologists*, p. 101-102). It remains uncertain to what degree factors other than rhetorical style determined the emphasis Athenagoras places



on the intelligence of his addressees. The apologists utilised a variety of tactics in order to defend Christianity to the Romans, including drawing upon Roman law (see, for instance, Justin, *First Apology* IV.1-V.4; [LXVIII.1-LXX.4](#)), or attempting to prove the veracity of its miraculous claims (see the [Fragments of Quadratus](#)). Athenagoras's tactic here, is to utilise something which he knows he has in common with his imperial audience – an appreciation for philosophical reasoning, although as Grant argues, it is unlikely that the apology was ever actually delivered to Marcus Aurelius and Commodus (*Greek Apologists*, p. 100).

Keywords in the original language:

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Thematic keywords in English:

- [atheism](#)
- [imperial cult](#)
- [libation](#)
- [philosophy](#)
- [piety](#)
- [reason](#)
- [sacrifice](#)

**Bibliographical references:**

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### [Athenagoras: Philosopher and Theologian](#)

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### [“The Embassy of Athenagoras”](#)

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### [Athenagoras, Legatio and de Resurrectione](#)

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**Other sources connected with this document:** Text

### [Justin Martyr, \*First Apology\* LXVIII.1-LXX.4](#)

Hadrian's Rescript to Minucius Fundanus

- [Read more about Justin Martyr, \*First Apology\* LXVIII.1-LXX.4](#)

Text

### [Quadratus of Athens, \*Fragments of Quadratus\* from Eusebius, \*Ecclesiastical History\* IV.3.1-2](#)

Quadratus presents an apology on behalf of the Christians to the emperor Hadrian

- [Read more about Quadratus of Athens, \*Fragments of Quadratus\* from Eusebius, \*Ecclesiastical History\* IV.3.1-2](#)

Text

### [Athenagoras of Athens, \*Supplication for the Christians\* XXXII](#)

Christian support for the empire

- [Read more about Athenagoras of Athens, \*Supplication for the Christians\* XXXII](#)

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