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The Doctrine of God in Athenagoras' *Legatio*

Pablo Argárate

We say that there is God and the Son, his Word, and the Holy Spirit, united in power (ἐνούμενα μὲν κατὰ δύναμιν) yet distinguished in rank (διαιρούμενα δὲ κατὰ τάξιν).¹

Athenagoras remained almost totally neglected in antiquity. He was largely ignored by his contemporaries and even by later church historians such as Eusebius and Jerome, Photius and even the *Suda*. He is mentioned only by Methodius of Olympus who quotes a passage from him and by Philip of Side who provides us with a confused description of his life.² The survival of the *Legatio pro Christianis* (Πρεσβεία περὶ χριστιανῶν)³ is thanks to an archbishop of Caesarea, Arethas, who in 914 charged his main scribe Baanes to make a copy of the *Legatio*, together with the *Treatise on the Resurrection* (Περὶ ἀναστάσεως νεκρῶν).⁴ This single manuscript (*Parisinus gr.* 451 =A) became the basis for all later editions. It is nevertheless highly problematic, since it contains many lacunae and is very corrupt. One of the main challenges to comprehension is the fact that Arethas himself engaged in an extensive reworking of the text copied by Baanes, introducing his own emendations. This makes establishing a critical edition a highly complicated task. Here, we ought to mention the editions by Schwartz, Schoedel and Marcovich.⁵

There is not much that we know about Athenagoras' life with certainty. An Athenian philosopher converted later to Christianity, he may have continued to direct his minor Platonic philosophical school. It is even possible that he may have directed the Catechetical school of Alexandria for some time.

The *Legatio* is to be dated to the year 177, the same year of the ferocious persecutions of Christians in Gaul. When a number of natural disasters occurred in the final years of Marcus Aurelius' reign, the populace held the Christians – among others – responsible for these calamities they believed were caused by the wrath of the gods. Accordingly, exacerbated by the mystery that surrounded Christians in their beliefs and practices, and by the consequent misunderstanding, several persecutions took place at the command of provincial magistrates, since there was no central legislation on such a matter. Within this context of recrudescence of persecution, Athenagoras writes to the emperor, asking him to put a stop to them, while at the same time refuting the accusations against Christians by

¹ *Leg. pro Christ.* 24.2

² *Meth. Olymp. Res.* 1.37.1–3.

³ Critical text in Schwartz 1891, and also (with English translation) in Schoedel 1972 and Marcovich 1990. Text and French translation in Pouderon 1992. English translation in Crehan 1956.

Studies: Barnard 1967a; Bauer 1902; Farquharson 1952; Bardy 1943; Ubaldi and Pellegrino 1947; Barnard 1967b; Barnard 1970a; Malherbe 1970a; Barnard 1972; Pouderon 1989; Pouderon 1994; Pouderon 1997; Pouderon 2005; Friedrowicz 2005 and Rankin 2009. Cf. Jacobsen 2014.

⁴ There has been a long dispute on the attribution of this work to Athenagoras. The most recent studies (such as Kiel 2016) consider that the *Resurrection* treatise is pseudonymous, dating it rather to the first half of the third century. The question is however still open.

⁵ Schwartz 1891; Schoedel 1972; Marcovich 1990.

providing a short presentation of Christian doctrine and ethics.⁶ His goal was to obtain the reinstatement of the rescripts of Trajan and Hadrian, considered favourable to Christians since they advise against the initiation of prosecution and discourage calumniators.⁷

Within the apologetic category of writings, the *Legatio* (πρεσβεία) is a genre which supposes a delegation addressed to the emperor.⁸ It is not clear if this actually took place or if it is rather a literary fiction. Furthermore, the text is obviously intended for publication, as a kind of ‘open letter’, attempting to reach not only the emperor, but also the informed pagan public.

Its structure can be divided into an introduction (1-3) and two main parts.⁹ In the first one (4-30), Christianity is opposed to pagan religion (in the first section it deals with the accusation of atheism as denial of all divinity [4-12], and in the second with the accusation of atheism regarding the refusal to sacrifice to and to recognize local divinities [13-30]). The second part of the *Legatio* presents the contrast, this time between Christian and pagan ethics (31-37), where Athenagoras responds to the accusation of incest (32-34) and those of infanticide and anthropophagy (35-36). The conclusion is drawn in chapter 37.

The style of the *Legatio* is Atticistic, in line with ‘the Second Sophistic’ movement. It is precise and rigorous,¹⁰ or in the words of Fiedrowicz “klar strukturiert, konziliant formulierend, stringent argumentierend”. It is the most philosophical of all the apologies, showing a very good knowledge of the different philosophical schools of antiquity and of great relevance.¹¹ Given this, it is difficult to agree with Marcovich, who says that he finds it ill-organized and not always clear.¹² Pouderon expresses exactly the opposite.¹³ In this sense, Barnard offers clear insights into the quality of the *Legatio*:

Athenagoras’ works show a marked literary excellence which places them in a class by themselves in the apologetic literature of the second century. His *Legatio* is far and away the best piece of literature

⁶ Cf. Barnard 1970b on the doctrine and Malherbe 1969a on ethics.

⁷ Cf. Pouderon 1989, 62.

⁸ Cf. Engberg *et al.* 2014.

⁹ Cf. Malherbe 1969c.

¹⁰ Cf. Pouderon 1989, 353 and also Fiedrowicz 2006, 77: “Klar strukturiert, konziliant formulierend, stringent argumentierend, zeigt diese Apologie, wie der Philosoph aus Athen seine Vergangenheit nicht verleugnete, sondern in eklektischer Weise an die besten Elemente der griechischen Kultur anknüpfte, um diese, insbesondere das Bekenntnis der Dichter und Philosophen zum Monotheismus (leg. 5-6), als Vorbereitung des Christentums zu betrachten, da diese Traditionen fortführt und vollendet.”

¹¹ Barnard 1972, 177: “The study of Athenagoras has suffered, not only from the apologist’s almost total neglect in Christian antiquity, but also from his being lumped together with the other Greek apologists, in the histories of early Christian doctrine, for the purposes of elucidating the development of Christian dogma. This has done him a real injustice for his subtle use of the Greek philosophical tradition differs from that of the other apologists.” Cf. also Powell 1967 and Lucks 1936.

¹² Cf. Marcovich 1990, vii: “Athenagoras’ learned and eloquent Plea for Christians (ca. AD 177) stands apart from the rest of Greek and Latin apologies. Doubtless, it is the most philosophical and, at the same time, the most controversial one [...] However, Athenagoras’ Plea is of great apologetic significance, and his Atticistic style is in line with ‘the Second Sophistic’ [...]. Athenagoras’ trend of ideas is not always clear and easy to follow. His exposition is ill-organized, and he is fond of showing off his rhetorical skill by introducing parenthetical sentences miles long. No wonder then that uneducated medieval scribes had misunderstood and mishandled his text.”

¹³ Pouderon 1989, 353: “[...] une construction précise, rigoureuse, même; une argumentation qui ne se disperse pas, mais qui ne tend qu’à un seul but, récuser les accusations païennes, quitte à les renvoyer à leurs auteurs.”

of its type which the Antonine age can boast. His well chosen language, considerable vocabulary, exalted style rising at times to great descriptive heights, his many technical and abstract words impress themselves upon the careful reader. It was not only his competence as a philosopher but his clarity of thought and fine mentality which enabled him to have such a sympathetic insight into the true meaning of Christian philosophy. And his moderation of judgement contributes to the authority of his conclusions which are reached by generally weighty and convincing arguments. In contrast to the high-handed and dogmatic attitude of Tatian and Theophilus, Athenagoras first assembles the evidence, discusses it and finally delivers an unbiased judgement. His approach is similar to Hooker in the seventeenth, and Bishop Butler in the eighteenth, centuries. It is all the more to be regretted that his works were so little known in Christian antiquity. It remains an insoluble riddle why this was so.¹⁴

Among Athenagoras' sources, and although he explicitly mentions the doxographies (ἐπὶ τὰς δόξας),¹⁵ it is evident that beyond these and summaries of Platonic and Stoic philosophy, he has a deeper knowledge of the different schools, knowledge that transcends those sources. In addition to this, there are the biblical texts: these are not limited to the four quotations of the Old Testament and passages of the New Testament, especially from Paul and from the Sermon on the Mount. As Rankin puts it: "For apologetic reasons any reliance on the testimony and authority of scripture are kept to a minimum, but they are there."¹⁶ Athenagoras is presenting the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in categories of the God of the philosophers. From the Christian tradition, in several passages, he seems to be aware of what Justin wrote in this regard.¹⁷

As stated before, at the start and after setting the context of the *Legatio* and having presented the three accusations (atheism, sexual immorality, anthropophagy) against Christians, Athenagoras focuses upon the first one, that of atheism.¹⁸ In this context, he distinguishes between the rightful condemnation of Diagoras of Melos by the Athenians on the grounds of atheism and that brought against the Christians. His argument is the same in several passages: surprisingly, it is based upon the distinction and even contraposition of God and matter. This distinction is, in his eyes, the clear proof that Christians are not atheists:

But surely it is not rational for them to apply the term atheism to us who distinguish God from matter (διαιροῦσαν ἀπὸ τῆς ὕλης τὸν θεόν) and show that matter (τὴν ὕλην) is one thing and God another and the difference between them is great (πολύ); for the divine is uncreated (ἀγέννητον) and eternal (αἰδίων) and can be contemplated only by thought and reason, whereas matter is created and perishable (γενητὴν καὶ φθαρτὴν).¹⁹

Athenagoras shows that this distinction was already in the poets when he writes: "Philolaus too, by saying that God encompasses all things as in a prison, shows that God is one and that he is above matter."²⁰ Something similar is stated below in a further

¹⁴ Barnard 1972, 179.

¹⁵ *Leg. pro Christ.* 6.2.

¹⁶ Rankin 2009, 167.

¹⁷ Cf. Edwards 2016 and also Parvis 2007.

¹⁸ Cf. *Just. I Apol.* 13.1. Cf. Schoedel 1973.

¹⁹ *Leg. pro Christ.* 4.1.

²⁰ *Leg. pro Christ.* 6.1.

argument: “[...] would it make sense to have us banished because we have a doctrine which distinguishes God and matter and their respective substances?”²¹ An analogous juxtaposition between God and matter appears in 15.2, where any acceptance of a correspondence between these contraries is regarded as a sign of atheism:

To be sure, if matter and God are the same – two names for one thing – then we are irreligious [...] not matter but God its artificer justly receives the praise and honour for the arrangement and good order of things.²²

In this, Christians agree with poets and philosophers,²³ who, relying upon this distinction could not be considered as atheists, since they recognize that there is only one God, the so-called gods being demons, matter or men.²⁴

However, in other passages, the accusation of atheism is not explicitly linked to this lack of distinction, but simply related to Christians’ refusal to acknowledge pagan gods. Indeed,

Even those [Athenagoras states] who accuse us of atheism for not acknowledging the same gods they know do not agree with each other about the gods.²⁵

Or, even more precisely, in relation to local divinities: “they accuse us of not recognizing the same gods as do the cities.”²⁶ The *Legatio* reproaches the accusers for not having understood who God is. Meanwhile, it is apparent that one of the reproaches made against Christians is their lack of sacrifices. Indeed,

they have not even the foggiest notion of the nature of God, are ignorant of scientific or theological doctrine and have no acquaintance with them, and measure piety in terms of sacrifice.²⁷

In the texts referred to above a further distinction is presented between the substance of God and that of matter.²⁸ The main difference is their uncreated or created character. Additional distinction is put forward through the opposed pairing of ‘eternal-perishable’, while it is affirmed that only from God do we attain his knowledge (contemplated only by thought and reason).²⁹ This dimension recurs with the same formulation “apprehended by mind and reason” (νόη [μόνω] καὶ λόγῳ) in two other passages.³⁰

By doing this, the *Legatio* has begun to provide God with attributes. This presentation appears in different passages. For instance:

²¹ *Leg. pro Christ* 24.1.

²² *Leg. pro Christ*. 15.2–3.

²³ Cf. Malherbe 1970b.

²⁴ Cf. *Leg. pro Christ*. 24.1.

²⁵ *Leg. pro Christ*. 14.1.

²⁶ *Leg. pro Christ*. 13.1, also 14.1.

²⁷ *Leg. pro Christ*. 13.1.

²⁸ Cf. *Leg. pro Christ*. 24.1.

²⁹ Cf. *Leg. pro Christ*. 4.1.

³⁰ *Leg. pro Christ*. 10.1, and 23.7.

Did he [Plato] then who came to understand the eternal God apprehend by mind and reason, who singled out his attributes (τὰ ἐπισυμβεβηκότα): true being (τὸ ὄντως ὄν), oneness of nature (μονοφύεζ), the good which is truth flowing from him [...].³¹

Besides his uncreated and eternal character, which features appear in most of the cases, further characterization is given in his description as “uncreated, impassible, and indivisible; he does not consist of parts”.³² Also God’s impassibility recurs on several occasions.

The most complete description of these attributes is offered, however, in the relevant chapter 10. There, Athenagoras writes:

We have brought before you one³³ God who is uncreated, eternal, impassible, incomprehensible, and infinite who can be apprehended by mind and reason alone (ἓνα τὸν ἀγέννητον καὶ αἰδίων καὶ ἀόρατον καὶ ἀπαθῆ καὶ ἀκατάληπτον καὶ ἀχώρητον, νῶ μόνῳ καὶ λόγῳ καταλαμβανόμενον), who is encompassed by light, beauty, spirit, and indescribable power [...].³⁴

Clear Middle Platonic influence is apparent in those six adjectives that start with α-. They present a clear negative theology. Next, Athenagoras continues his description, this time in a positive (although δύναμις is qualified by a negative adjective, ἀνεκδιγήτῳ) presentation throughout, in images traditionally used for the divine. It is remarkable that here God is not linked to being,³⁵ while this happens in other passages, where he is described as τὸ ὄν³⁶ or even τὸ ὄντως ὄν.³⁷

The above-quoted paragraph is the first out of the five which compose chapter 10 of the *Legatio*. In this, Athenagoras summarizes his doctrine on God. While the first paragraph refers to God in himself and in relation to his creation, introducing at the end the role of the Logos, paragraphs 2-3 present this Logos to be regarded now also as Son, paragraph 4 focuses on the Spirit, while the last one is a brief summary of Christian Trinitarian teaching and God’s providence over the world through his angels and ministers.

A further attribute, clearly within the Platonic tradition, is the one of goodness. “This goodness belongs to God as an attribute and is coexistent with him as colour is with corporeal substance; without it he does not exist.”³⁸ Indeed, in his presentation of Plato, he states:

Did he then who came to understand the eternal God apprehended by mind and reason, who singled out his attributes: true being, oneness of nature, the good which in truth flowing from him [...].³⁹

³¹ *Leg. pro Christ.* 23.7.

³² *Leg. pro Christ.* 8.3.

³³ Better than Schoedel 1972’s ‘a’.

³⁴ *Leg. pro Christ.* 10.1.

³⁵ An exception is 4.2: “But since we teach that there is one God (ἓνα θεόν), the Maker of the universe (τοῦ πάντος ποιητήν), and that he is not created (οὐ γεγόμενον) (since it is not Being that is created, but non-being), whereas all things were made by the Word that issues from him (τοῦ παρ’ αὐτοῦ λόγου πεποιηκότα) [...]”

³⁶ *Leg. pro Christ.* 15.1.

³⁷ *Leg. pro Christ.* 23.7.

³⁸ *Leg. pro Christ.* 24.2.

³⁹ *Leg. pro Christ.* 23.7.

Going back to the first paragraph referred to above, before the six apophatic adjectives, its most important assertion is of the ‘one’ (ἓνα) God. Indeed, after the introduction of the *Legatio*, and having laid out the accusations to which Christians were exposed, Athenagoras produces a sort of creedal formulation:

But since we teach that there is one God (ἓνα θεόν), the Maker of the universe (τοῦ πάντος ποιητήν), and that he is not created (οὐ γενόμενον) (since it is not Being that is created, but non-being) whereas all things were made by the Word that issues from him (τοῦ παρ’ αὐτοῦ λόγου πεποιηκότα) [...].⁴⁰

In this succinct formulation, very similar to the one of the tenth chapter, but more focused on the essential aspects, four statements are to be discovered: the oneness of God, who is the Creator, being himself uncreated. Finally, he creates everything through his Word. God is put in relation to all things by regarding him as ποιητής. Everything is connected to God through the mediation of his Word/Logos, who issues (is) from him. There is here a clear reference to John 1:3.⁴¹ Finally, there is no mention here of the Spirit. This happens however in several creedal statements even of the New Testament itself.

The author presents Christian ‘teaching’ (λόγος) as essentially monotheistic. Immediately after the cited passages and in the following two paragraphs, Athenagoras claims that this same belief in the one God is present in Greek poetry and philosophy.⁴² This is the case, in his mind, of Euripides and in Sophocles. Indeed, he writes:

Sophocles agrees with him [Euripides], when he says: ‘There is one God, in truth there is but one, Who made the heavens, and the broad earth beneath.’⁴³

In addition to them, as already referred, “Philolaus too, by saying that God encompasses all things as in a prison shows that God is one and that he is above matter.”⁴⁴

In the rest of chapter six, Athenagoras proceeds to show how the philosophers made the same claim. After discussing what his sources are and proclaiming his trust in the emperors’ knowledge of philosophy, he presents this doctrine of the one God in Plato, in Aristotle and his school and, eventually, in the Stoics.

For Plato, he quotes the famous passage of *Ti.* 28c:

Plato says: ‘It is a hard task to find the Maker and Father of this universe, and having found him it is impossible to declare him to all.’ Here he understands the uncreated and eternal God to be one (ἓνα).⁴⁵

Athenagoras has to deal, nevertheless, with the fact that Plato acknowledges other ‘gods’ and explains this problem, eventually concluding: “he [Plato] understands the Creator of all things to be the one uncreated God [...].”⁴⁶ In doing so, it follows that Christians hold:

⁴⁰ *Leg. pro Christ.* 4.2.

⁴¹ πάντα δι’ αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ χωρὶς αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο οὐδὲ ἓν, ὃ γέγονεν.

⁴² Cf. Zeegers-van der Vorst 1972.

⁴³ *Leg. pro Christ.* 5.2. Although quoted by the fathers, it does not belong to Sophocles.

⁴⁴ *Leg. pro Christ.* 6.1. Also Justin, Clement, Tertullian and Minucius Felix cite this passage.

⁴⁵ *Leg. pro Christ.* 6.2.

⁴⁶ *Leg. pro Christ.* 6.2.

neither are we atheists when we acknowledge him by whose Word all things were created and upheld by his Spirit and assert he is God.⁴⁷

After this highly-significant Trinitarian excursus, it is Aristotle's turn. He and his school, at least in the presentation of the apologist, are monotheists:

Aristotle and his school bring before us one (ἕνα) God whom they liken to a composite living being and say that he consists of soul and body.⁴⁸

The case gets more complex with the Stoics:

The Stoics, although they multiply names for the divine being by means of titles corresponding to the permutations of matter through which they say the Spirit of God moves, in reality think of God as one (ἕνα)... then it follows from their teaching that God is one [...].⁴⁹

Athenagoras is aware that, at least in first impression, they do not seem to be monotheists. His explanation refers to their notion of "artisan fire" (πῦρ τεχνικόν) and especially to the Spirit of God that pervades all.

With this in mind, he concludes his excursion through Greek poets and philosophers by stating:

Seeing, then, that by and large all admit, though reluctantly, when they get down to the first principles (ἀρχάς) of everything, that the divine being (το θεῖον) is one (ἓν) [...].⁵⁰

Christians do not think otherwise: "we think and rightly believe that God is one", (ἕνα θεὸν εἶναι).⁵¹

In chapter eight, another argument for the one God is offered. This time it is an argument *ad absurdum*. Relevant here is the pivotal position that Athenagoras attaches to the doctrine of the one God:

Consider, in light of the following arguments, the teaching that God, the Creator of this universe, is one (εἷς) from the beginning so that you may also understand the reasoning which supports our faith (τὸν λογισμὸν ἡμῶν τῆς πίστεως).⁵²

In addition to this attempt to show Greek poets' and philosophers' support for Christian doctrine, in several passages Athenagoras stresses again and again their belief in the one and only God. Indeed: "God the Maker of the world is from the beginning one

⁴⁷ *Leg. pro Christ.* 6.2.

⁴⁸ *Leg. pro Christ.* 6.3.

⁴⁹ *Leg. pro Christ.* 6.4.

⁵⁰ *Leg. pro Christ.* 7.1.

⁵¹ *Leg. pro Christ.* 7.1.

⁵² *Leg. pro Christ.* 8.1.

and alone (εἷς [...] καὶ μόνος).”⁵³ This doctrine had been proclaimed by the prophets.⁵⁴ Everything is subordinated to the one God, the Creator of everything.⁵⁵

It is clear that in most of the passages that have been quoted above, and alongside the proclamation of the one God, his function as Creator is central. Everything has been created by God. This appears already in the early summary of 4.2: “since we teach that there is one God, the Maker of this universe (τοῦδε τοῦ παντός ποιητήν).”⁵⁶ These are almost exactly Plato’s words: ποιητήν καὶ πατέρα τοῦδε τοῦ παντός.⁵⁷ In that passage, Plato uses also another formulation: δημιουργὸς πατήρ. Akin to this is Athenagoras’ summary of the philosopher’s teaching: δημιουργὸν τῶν ὅλων.⁵⁸

In the eighth chapter, where, as stated, Athenagoras introduces an argument *ad absurdum*, there is a clear concentration on the title of ‘Maker of the world’. Indeed, the expression ὁ δὲ τοῦ κόσμου ποιητὴς appears, with slight variations, five times.⁵⁹ A similar expression is ποιητήν [...] καὶ δεσπότην.⁶⁰

Related to this is the thought that creation, in its order and beauty, leads to the Creator: the cosmological argument.

If we held opinions like those of Diagoras in spite of having such impressive signs conducive to piety (θεοσέβειαν) in the order (τὸ εὐτακτον), the perfect harmony (σύμφωνον), the magnitude, the colours, the shapes, and the arrangement of the world (τὴν διάθεσιν τοῦ κόσμου) [...].⁶¹

Speaking about Euripides, he affirms that:

[...] he discerned Another from his works, understanding the things that appear as providing a glimpse of things unseen. The one whose works they are and by whose spirit they are guided he took to be God.⁶²

Referring to Plato and in agreement with him, he warns against bestowing divinity on creatures:

If then I admire the sky and the elements as products of his craftsmanship and yet do not worship them as gods, since I know the law of dissolution which governs them, how can I call things gods which I know were made by men?⁶³

As clearly shown, an essential element of Christian faith for Athenagoras is that God is the Creator of the entire universe. Together with this claim, comes the statement

⁵³ *Leg. pro Christ.* 8.7.

⁵⁴ Cf. *Leg. pro Christ.* 9.2.

⁵⁵ *Leg. pro Christ.* 18.2 (and to the Word that issues from him).

⁵⁶ *Leg. pro Christ.* 30.6 brings exactly the same construction.

⁵⁷ *Leg. pro Christ.* 6.2. These two names come again in 27.2.

⁵⁸ *Leg. pro Christ.* 6.2.

⁵⁹ *Leg. pro Christ.* 8.4.

⁶⁰ *Leg. pro Christ.* 16.3.

⁶¹ *Leg. pro Christ.* 4.2.

⁶² *Leg. pro Christ.* 5.2–6.1.

⁶³ *Leg. pro Christ.* 16.5.

that he is himself uncreated. Athenagoras uses for this the concept of ἀγέννητος. The alternative concept of ἀγέννητος does not imply yet at this stage something different as the Word's generation.

Indeed, in the first summary, several times already cited, Athenagoras writes: "we teach that there is one God, the Maker of the universe, and that he is not created."⁶⁴ Interpreting Plato, he says: "Here he understands the uncreated and eternal (ἀγέννητον καὶ αἰδίου) God to be one."⁶⁵ This connection between ἀγέννητος and αἰδίου is very characteristic and appears several times in the *Legatio*. For instance, in chapter 10, the first two negative attributes (after affirming that God is one) are the ones of ἀγέννητον and αἰδίου.⁶⁶ The same combination appears in another place too.⁶⁷

While in the *Legatio* we find several formulations that are explicitly Trinitarian, there are more formulations where only the Logos/Word appears, the Spirit being absent. This is nothing new in itself, since, as already affirmed, something similar is to be found in the New Testament.

In numerous quotations above, we have seen the reference to the mediation of the Word in creation. I would like to focus upon two of them. Both are very relevant. The first one is Athenagoras' first statement regarding Christian faith and the refutation of the accusation of atheism. It is the confession of the one God, the uncreated Creator. In this context, two affirmations are made concerning the Logos. Firstly, everything was made διὰ him. The second one refers to the origin of that Logos. Although the Greek text does not have a verb for this relation, it is clearly understood. The Logos is, proceeds from and issues from God (τοῦ παρ' αὐτοῦ λόγου):

But since we teach that there is one God, the Maker of the universe [...] whereas all things were made by the Word that issues from him [...].⁶⁸

The second passage is the first paragraph of chapter 10. There, in a detailed presentation of God, the mediation of the Word is further described:

We have brought before you a God who is uncreated, eternal, impassible, incomprehensible, and infinite, who can be apprehended by mind and reason alone, who is encompassed by light, beauty, spirit, and indescribable power, and who created, adorned, and now rules the universe through the Word that issues from him (ὅφ' οὗ γεγένηται τὸ πᾶν διὰ <τοῦ παρ'> αὐτοῦ λόγου καὶ διακεκόσμηται καὶ συγκρατεῖται).⁶⁹

⁶⁴ *Leg. pro Christ.* 4.2.

⁶⁵ *Leg. pro Christ.* 6.2.

⁶⁶ *Leg. pro Christ.* 10. 1: "We have brought before you a God who is uncreated, eternal, impassible, incomprehensible, and infinite, who can be apprehended by mind and reason alone, who is encompassed by light, beauty, spirit, and indescribable power, and who created, adorned, and now rules the through the Word that issues from him. I have given sufficient evidence that we are not atheists on the basis of arguments presenting this God as one."

⁶⁷ *Leg. pro Christ.* 22.5.

⁶⁸ *Leg. pro Christ.* 4.2.

⁶⁹ *Leg. pro Christ.* 10.1.

As expressed, the paragraph passes from God's attributes through his "indescribable power" to his presentation as Creator. This is carried out through three passive verbs: *γεγένηται*, *διακεκόσμηται*, *συγκρατεῖται*. It must be said here that in the original text the construction is in the passive voice and subject is the universe (*τὸ πᾶν*). All this happens through the mediation of *αὐτοῦ λόγου*, his Word. The Uncreated creates through his Word. The relation of the Logos to God is affirmed with the same expression of 4.2: *τοῦ παρ' αὐτοῦ λόγου*. The function of the Word is further introduced as not only making, but also as adorning (there is also an ordering function to be considered here) and holding together (better than Schoedel's 'rules').⁷⁰ From this perspective, it is the Logos that produces and upholds the universe. Remarkable is that fact that the verb *συγκρατῶ* is often associated with the activity of the Spirit.⁷¹

Two further passages explain God's Logos. In the first one, the divinity of God and his Word are stated.

Proof has now been offered to show to the best of my ability, if not as it deserves, that we are not atheists when we recognize the Maker of the universe and the Word proceeding from him (*καὶ τὸν παρ' αὐτοῦ λόγον*) as God.⁷²

In the second one, in a bold move, Athenagoras compares the relationship existing between both emperors, to the one between God and his Logos.

[...] for as all things been subjected to you, a father and a son, who your kingdom from ('for the king's life is God's hand', as the prophetic spirit says), so all things are subordinated to the one God and the Word that issues from him (*καὶ τῷ παρ' αὐτοῦ λόγῳ*) whom we consider his inseparable Son (*ὕψι νοουμένῳ*).⁷³

New here is the identification between God's Logos and Son. A deeper analysis of this aspect is to be found also in the relevant chapter 10. As above stated, paragraphs 2–3 discuss the Logos, considered now also as the Son.

For we think there is also a Son of God. Now let no one think that this talk of God having a Son is ridiculous. For we have not come to our views on either God the Father or his Son as do the poets, who create myths which they present the gods as no better than men. On the contrary, the Son of God is the Word of the Father in its Ideal Form and Energizing Power (*ἐν ἰδεᾷ καὶ ἐνέργειᾳ*); for in his likeness and through him all things came into existence, which presupposes that the Father and the Son are one. Now since the Son is in the Father and the Father in the Son by a powerful unity of spirit (*ἐνότητι καὶ δυνάμει πνεύματος*), the Son of God is the mind and reason of the Father.⁷⁴

As referred to above, the first paragraph had introduced the Logos as creating and upholding creation. The new paragraph links it to God's Son. In doing so, the author

⁷⁰ Indeed, in the following quotation, Schoedel translates the verb as 'upheld'.

⁷¹ *Leg. pro Christ.* 6.2: ὑφ' οὗ λόγῳ δεδημιούργηται καὶ τῷ παρ' αὐτοῦ πνεύματι συνέχεται τὰ πάντα.

⁷² *Leg. pro Christ.* 30.6.

⁷³ *Leg. pro Christ.* 18.2.

⁷⁴ *Leg. pro Christ.* 10.2

needs to justify his position, distancing himself from those myths where a god may have a son. The myths concerned are here attributed to the poets: Athenagoras takes a critical stance, though hitherto his attitude to the poets throughout the *Legatio* has been rather positive, seeing them as witnesses to monotheistic thought. At any rate, God's Son is identified with "the Word of the Father" (λόγος τοῦ πατρὸς). A little earlier, Athenagoras had introduced the idea that God is the Father. This notion appears in Plato's discussion on the divine as well. The identification between Son and Logos is then further explained: it happens ἐν ἰδεᾷ καὶ ἐνέργειᾳ.⁷⁵ Schoedel's translation ("in Ideal Form and Energizing Power") is somewhat puzzling, showing the difficulty of understanding this – to a great extent bewildering – expression. While ἰδέα is a central element in Plato's system, the same can be said about ἐνέργεια for Aristotle. Schoedel proposes, however, to consider it a Stoic-Philonic distinction between the (cosmic) λόγος ἐνδιάθετος and (containing all the Forms) and the λόγος προφορικός (as agent in creation).⁷⁶ Through this expression, Athenagoras would be offering his views on the Logos theory in its different phases. Unlike Justin, the *Legatio* does not openly propose that theory, but appears to refer to it only implicitly. As well as this precise explanation, it throws some light upon the mediation of the Logos in creation. It is apparent that there is here no reference to its incarnation, nor to the historical existence of Christ. This is perhaps due to the polemical character of Athenagoras' argument,⁷⁷ but the Logos' relevance and function is especially cosmic (and intellectual). Like in Justin, the notion of Logos, which has a long philosophical, Jewish and even Johannine background, assists in explaining the production of the universe by the transcendent God.

After this, the text emphasizes the union existing between God and his Logos-Son. This is expressed in terms of *perichoresis*, further described as ἐνότητι καὶ δυνάμει πνεύματος. While Schoedel translates it as "by a powerful unity of spirit", it could also be translated "by the unity and power of the spirit". In any case, although one may be tempted here to see a mention of the Trinity, one needs to take into account that πνεῦμα has no article.⁷⁸ Further, the Logos is identified with the Father's νοῦς καὶ λόγος:

If in your great wisdom you would like to know what 'Son' means, I will tell you in a few brief words: it means that he is the first begotten (πρώτον γέννημα) of the Father. The term is used not because he came into existence (οὐχ ὡς γενόμενον) (for God, who is eternal mind (νοῦς), had in himself his logos from the beginning, since he was eternally rational (λογικός)) but because he came forth (προελθὼν) to serve as Ideal Form and Energizing Power (ἰδεᾷ καὶ ἐνέργειᾳ) for everything material which like an entity without qualities and [...] underlies things in a state characterized by the mixture of heavier and lighter elements.⁷⁹

Athenagoras delves further into the Son's being, i.e. into his relationship with the Father. In order to do this, he needs to distinguish the origin of the Son from the origin of the creatures. Unlike the latter, he was not created (οὐχ ὡς γενόμενον), but proceeds

⁷⁵ This strange formula is to be found also in Hipp. *Haer.* 5,7,22 with regard to pagan divinities.

⁷⁶ Cf. Schoedel 1972, 21, n. 10.2.

⁷⁷ Cf. 21.4: Yet if a god assumes flesh by divine dispensation (θείαν οἰκονομίαν), is he forthwith a slave of lust?

⁷⁸ Neither does it have it in Marcovich's edition. Cf. Marcovich 1990, 40.

⁷⁹ *Leg. pro Christ.* 10.3.

from (προελθών) God. This is as much as he can say on the Logos. It has a different origin from God than that of the creatures. Implicitly, it is said that the Logos *is* God, since it has been affirmed several times that God is ἀγένετος. The Logos is with God, and not with the creatures. There is still no clear notion of generation though. The *Legatio* contents itself with the participle προελθών. In addition to this, unlike all temporal creative processes, the procedure involving the Logos is eternal.⁸⁰ Here the Son is presented as God's λόγος, eternally present in the νοῦς, which is the Father. This expression is somehow confusing, since at the end of the previous paragraph, Athenagoras had stated that “the Son of God is the νοῦς καὶ λόγος of the Father.”⁸¹ Consequently, the Logos would be the νοῦς of the νοῦς. Similarly, as the text reads, God has always been λογικός because he eternally has his λόγος in him. In any case, the procession or origination of the Son, presented here again with the expression ἰδεα καὶ ἐνέργεια, has a cosmic function. It is oriented towards creation and information of matter. He came forth in order to be the idea and power for the material world.

Concerning the Spirit Athenagoras provides unmistakably less information compared to what was offered on the Logos-Son.⁸² In some passages, he speaks rather of a dyad, ignoring completely the Spirit. There is a clear example in chapter 30:

Proof has now been offered to show to the best of my ability, if not as it deserves, that we are no atheists when we recognize the Maker of the universe and the Word proceeding from him as God.⁸³

If we leave aside references to the teaching of the poets and philosophers (chiefly Euripides and the Stoics), relevant here is Athenagoras' description of prophetic inspiration, his understanding of it as an outflow or ‘effluence’, as well as its presence in several Trinitarian formulas.

As already quoted, speaking about Euripides, he affirms that

he discerned Another from his works, understanding the things that appear as providing a glimpse of things unseen. The one whose works (ποιήματα) they are and by whose spirit they are guided (ὅφ' οὗ τῷ πνεύματι ἡνοχεῖται) he took to be God.⁸⁴

Athenagoras attributes the Spirit to God; it is his Spirit. His function here appears to be of directing and guiding creatures. The verb ἡνοχεῖται means to hold the reins, to hold control originally of a horse; metaphorically of a reality, in this case, the universe. So regarded, the Spirit is the charioteer of creation.

The Spirit has more relevance attached to its concept in Stoic thought. After presenting the doctrine of the one God of Plato and Aristotle, Athenagoras describes this theme as it existed within the Stoic school on two occasions. As stated, the first occasion is after the presentation of Aristotle's views. Here he writes:

⁸⁰ Cf. Dettling 1981.

⁸¹ *Leg. pro Christ.* 10.2.

⁸² Cf. Malherbe 1969b.

⁸³ *Leg. pro Christ.* 30.6.

⁸⁴ *Leg. pro Christ.* 5.2–3.

The Stoics, although they multiply names for the divine being by means of titles corresponding to the permutations of matter (κατὰ τὰς παραλλάξεις τῆς ὕλης) through which they say the Spirit of God moves (δι' ἧς φασὶ τὸ πνεῦμα χωρεῖν τοῦ θεοῦ), in reality think of God as one. For if God is an artisan fire (πῦρ τεχνικόν) systematically proceeding to the production of the world, containing in itself all the generative principles (σπερματικούς λόγους) by which everything takes place accord with Destiny, and if his Spirit penetrates the whole world (τὸ δὲ πνεῦμα αὐτοῦ διήκει δι' ὅλου τοῦ κόσμου), then it follows from their teaching that God is one, receiving the name 'Zeus' to correspond to the 'seething' element of matter or 'Hera' to correspond to the 'air', and being given all his other names to correspond to every part of matter, which he pervades.⁸⁵

From this, it is clear that the Spirit of God has an active role by penetrating (διήκει) and moving (χωρεῖν) matter and the entire world. And doing so, he assists God, understood in the Stoic system as a πῦρ τεχνικόν, in producing the world. As well, it is clear that it has a unifying function.

In another passage, the *Legatio* presents once again the Stoic doctrine on the Spirit in a similar form. Here, the Spirit pervades matter, transforming it. New here is that the different names of the divine in Stoic thought are applied in the following paragraph explicitly to the Spirit:

But in the case of the Stoics this can be said: 'If you think that the supreme God is one, both uncreated and eternal, and you say that there are composite entities resulting from the mutation of matter and that the spirit of God pervading matter in its permutations (καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ θεοῦ διὰ τῆς ὕλης κεχωρηκὸς κατὰ τὰς παραλλάξεις αὐτῆς) receives now one name, now another,⁸⁶ then material things will be God's body, and when the elements perish at the cosmic conflagration, such names must perish together with these things and the spirit of God alone remain.' Who then could believe those to be gods whose bodies the permutation of matter destroys?⁸⁷

Beyond these philosophical speculations on the Spirit, in the biblical realm his understanding of the prophetic Spirit is germane, when Athenagoras delves into his pneumatological thought on the Spirit. Other apologists, chiefly Justin, have emphasized this dimension as well.

In chapter seven, he contrasts the knowledge of God attained by poets and philosophers to that received by Christians. From the outset, he emphasizes its fragmentary and *en passant* character which explains their different and opposed doctrines on God. However, in passing, he acknowledges a positive element in their quest:

For poets and philosophers have gone at this and other matters by guesswork, each of them moved by his own soul through some affinity with the breath of God (κατὰ συμπάθειαν τῆς παρὰ τοῦ θεοῦ πνοῆς) to seek, if possible, to find and understand the truth.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ *Leg. pro Christ.* 6.4.

⁸⁶ Good summary of Stoic doctrine.

⁸⁷ *Leg. pro Christ.* 22.5.

⁸⁸ *Leg. pro Christ.* 7.2. Tatian, Theophilus and Clement had also contrasted knowledge gained by conjecture to revelation.

It seems here to present a sort of *praeparatio evangelica*, where somehow the Spirit of God or his breath (τοῦ θεοῦ πνοῆς) mysteriously guided them from within in their quest for God. This activity of the Spirit in the shadows of the human soul becomes, however, clear and open in his account of the inspiration of the prophets.⁸⁹

We, however, have prophets as witnesses of what we think and believe. They have spoken out by a divinely inspired Spirit about God and the things of God. You too would admit, since you surpass others in wisdom and reverence for the truly divine, that it would be irrational to abandon belief in the Spirit from God (τῷ παρὰ τοῦ θεοῦ πνεύματι) which had moved the mouths of the prophets like musical instruments (ὡς ὄργανα) and to pay attention to human opinions.⁹⁰

Here, Athenagoras states that in the prophet it is the Spirit of God who speaks. The object of their revelation is “God and the things of God”. More interesting still is his inspiration theory. The prophets are regarded as (musical) organs of the Spirit.⁹¹

Further elucidation of prophetic inspiration comes two chapters below, where, after having demonstrated the existence of the one God through an argument *ad absurdum*, Athenagoras comes to present the biblical doctrine on this issue. Here he puts forward four short quotations of the prophets that deny the existence of other gods.⁹² The introduction to those citations is of particular interest:

But since the voices of the prophets affirm our arguments – and I expect that you who are so eager for knowledge and so learned are not without understanding of the teachings either of Moses or of Isaiah and Jeremiah and the rest of the prophets who in the ecstasy of their thoughts, as the divine Spirit moved them (κινήσαντος αὐτοῦ τοῦ θείου πνεύματος), uttered what they had been inspired to say, the Spirit making use of them as a flautist might blow into a flute (ὡς εἰ καὶ αὐλητῆς αὐλὸν ἐμπνεύσαι) – what, then, do they say?⁹³

Here Athenagoras goes further into what he had already expressed concerning the prophets as organs of the Spirit. New here is the statement that revelation occurs “in the ecstasy of their thoughts” and the ‘organ’ image is here presented more in detail with the image of the flute. It is the Spirit who moves them – exalting them outside the limits of their natural thinking – and speaks in and through them. At the end of the previous paragraph is again presented the distinction between human and divine knowledge that opened the chapter. Only in God – through his Spirit – we are made able to know God and the divine. While poets and philosophers have succeeded in gaining some sort of knowledge of God, chiefly his unity, the way forward can only be followed with an open revelation of the Spirit in history.⁹⁴ One needs to take account here of the positive evaluation made by Athenagoras of Greek poetry and philosophy. Although not explicitly

⁸⁹ Bingham 2016.

⁹⁰ *Leg. pro Christ.* 7.3.

⁹¹ Cf. Just. *1 Apol.* 36; Theoph. *Ad Autol.* 2.9; Clem. *Protr.* 8. 78.1.

⁹² *Bar.* 3:36; 1. 44:6; *Is.* 43:10–11; *Is.* 66:1.

⁹³ *Leg. pro Christ.* 9.1.

⁹⁴ Cf. Peglau 1999.

considering them λόγοι σπερματικοί,⁹⁵ the *Legatio* sees elements of truth in their quest and even divine assistance.⁹⁶

After this introduction, Athenagoras resumes the teaching of the prophets on the one God. Actually, they simply deny the existence of other gods. In this way, the argument of the prophets complements the argument *ad absurdum* of the previous chapter: there are no gods besides the one God. This revelation is carried out by the same Spirit of God, mysteriously in the poets and prophets, more openly in the prophets. In this way, the Spirit moves and unifies creation and at the same time reveals to human beings the mystery of the one God.

Again in the significant chapter 10, further insights on Athenagoras' thoughts on the Spirit appear. Starting with 10.1, but especially developed in 10.2–3, the *Legatio* refers to God's Logos, who is also his Son, and especially his function in creation. Here, Athenagoras refers to the Spirit. His observation connects up with the previous chapter through a biblical quote attributed, as it has been stated before, to the prophetic Spirit. Having said so, the author intends to provide a glimpse into the same Spirit. Here he uses the image of ἀπόρροια.⁹⁷

The prophetic Spirit also agrees with this account. 'For the Lord', it says, 'made me the beginning of his ways for his works.'⁹⁸ Further, this same Holy Spirit, which is active in those who speak prophetically, we regard as an effluence of God which flows forth from him and returns like a ray of the sun (ἀπόρροϊαν εἶναι φαμεν τοῦ θεοῦ, ἀπορρέον και ἐπαναφερόμενον ὡς ἀκτῖνα ἡλίου).⁹⁹

It must be said here, though, that in quoting the biblical citation the apologist confuses the Logos with God's Wisdom. Highly significant is the notion of ἀπόρροια used for the Spirit. Although it comes close to what Philo says (though he does not use the term itself), this image is a real contribution of Athenagoras to the debate.¹⁰⁰ The Spirit is regarded in a very dynamic relation with God. The image of the sun's ray as well as the one of light from fire, which comes in another passage,¹⁰¹ will become successful images in later Trinitarian thought to describe divine processions.

With the following and last paragraph of the tenth chapter, we come to Athenagoras' explicitly Trinitarian formulas, which will be presented and analysed now.

After describing Plato's views on the one God, Athenagoras, referring now to Christians, writes:

[...] neither are we atheists when we acknowledge him by whose Word all things were created (ὅφ' οὗ λόγῳ δεδημιούργηται) and upheld by his Spirit (καὶ τῷ παρ' αὐτοῦ πνεύματι συνέχεται τὰ πάντα) and assert that he is God [...].¹⁰²

⁹⁵ Although this terminology comes in 6.4, it is in the context of creation and information of matter.

⁹⁶ Cf. Pouderon and Doré 1998.

⁹⁷ The term appears in *Wis.* 7:25.

⁹⁸ *Prov.* 8:22.

⁹⁹ *Leg. pro Christ.* 10.4.

¹⁰⁰ *Ph. Gig.* 25–27.

¹⁰¹ *Leg. pro Christ.* 24.2.

¹⁰² *Leg. pro Christ.* 6.2.

Here we find a classical presentation of the distinct functions of the two other divine persons. While creation takes place through the Word, it is upheld by the Spirit. In this way, we find here a more precise description of the Trinitarian God. God (Father) acts through his Word and his Spirit. As was the case with the Logos, the Spirit is now presented as *παρ' αὐτοῦ* as well. Both display an inherent reference to God; they belong to God and issue from him. Beyond these attributions to Word and Spirit, Athenagoras displays his Trinitarian thought in the following three highly-relevant passages.

Who then would not be amazed if he heard of men called atheists who bring forward God the Father, God the Son, and the Holy Spirit and who proclaim both their power in their unity (*ἐν τῇ ἐνώσει δύναντι*) and their diversity in rank (*καὶ ἐν τῇ τάξει διαίρεσιν*).¹⁰³

The same opposition between *ἐνώσις* and *διαίρεσις* appears in the following passage, where again the distinction according to the rank is present (a slight difference constitutes *κατὰ τάξιν* instead of *ἐν τῇ τάξει*):

We say that there is God and the Son, his Word, and the Holy Spirit, united in power (*ἐνούμενα μὲν κατὰ δύναντιν*), yet distinguished in rank (*διαιρούμενα δὲ κατὰ τάξιν*) as the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, since the Son is mind, reason [*λόγος*, word], and wisdom of the Father and the Spirit an effluence like light from fire (*ἀπόρροια ὡς φῶς ἀπὸ πυρὸς τὸ πνεῦμα*).¹⁰⁴

New here is the further characterization of the Son and of the Spirit as well. This development is designed again with the notion of *ἀπόρροια*, which is illustrated here through a different image (light from fire instead of the sunbeam).

In the following passage, appear the previous concepts of *ἐνώσις* and *διαίρεσις*, along with *ἐνότης* and not least *κοινωνία*:

For we are men who consider life here below of very little worth. We are attended only by the knowledge of him who is truly God (*τοῦ τὸν ὄντως θεόν*) and of the Word that issues from him (*καὶ τὸν παρ' αὐτοῦ λόγον*) – a knowledge as to what is the unity (*ἐνότης*) of the Son (*τοῦ παιδός*) with the Father, what is the communion of the Father with the Son (*πρὸς τὸν υἱὸν κοινωνία*), what is the Spirit, what is the unity (*ἐνώσις*) of these [powers] – the Spirit, the Son (*τοῦ παιδός*), and the Father – and their diversity when thus united (*καὶ διαίρεσις ἐνουμένων*).¹⁰⁵

These three passages are extremely significant for understanding Athenagoras' contribution into the Trinitarian realm of thinking. It is crucial in that he introduces terminology that later became very successful in voicing the evolution of Trinitarian theology. The Father is God, even more, *ὁ ὄντως θεός*. The Son is *νοῦς καὶ λόγος* of the Father. One sees here an intellectual focus in the understanding of the Logos. Emphasis is laid upon the unity between God and his Word/Son.¹⁰⁶ In the third paragraph, this

¹⁰³ *Leg. pro Christ.* 10.5. For this last formulation cf. *Tert. Adv. Prax.* 2 and also *Just. 1 Apol.* 13.3.

¹⁰⁴ *Leg. pro Christ.* 24.2.

¹⁰⁵ *Leg. pro Christ.* 12.3.

¹⁰⁶ Curiously, in that passage the Son is introduced – as for instance in the *Didache* – as *παῖς*, but immediately afterwards as *υἱός*.

ένότης is affirmed exclusively for them. In other words, the Spirit is excluded. Even more, their κοινωνία is predicted, a term usually connected with the Spirit. Only at the end of the passage, ένωσις and διαίρεσις are attributed to the three 'persons' – which are never described as such.¹⁰⁷ The use of both notions, as well as of κοινωνία in Trinitarian language, is a significant contribution of Athenagoras.

The three passages are characterized by this tension between unity and distinction. While the first one is linked to δύναμις,¹⁰⁸ more interesting is the distinction κατὰ τάξιν. This notion could have some point in common with Justin and might have influenced Tertullian later.¹⁰⁹ In any case, it needs to be understood as a functional distinction. It establishes neither a hierarchy nor subordination.¹¹⁰

For the Spirit, little is said, only the image of a ἀπόρροια is presented. To some extent, this could be said for the Logos too. This time the effluence is not compared to a sunbeam but also with another popular image, light from a fire. At any rate, Athenagoras is aware of the dynamic tension of the Trinity – a term which he does not use, a διαίρεσις ένουμένων.¹¹¹

After this long discussion of the *Legatio*, it is time to draw some conclusions. Athenagoras' *Legatio* stands in the tradition of the second-century apologies. Within a clear context and having an explicit goal, they address the authority (highly sophisticated emperors, especially Marcus Aurelius, in the case of Athenagoras, who could follow the *Legatio*'s arguments) and with it the informed (pagan) public. The topic of the apologies is a defence of Christianity, by offering a compendium of its doctrine (especially showing its faith in the one God) and practices. In this sense, we ought to be aware of this aim in analysing pieces of this genre. It is a presentation *ad extra*, relying on cultural and philosophical arguments, which intends to demonstrate chiefly that Christians are not atheists and, on this basis, asks for a change in the state's attitude towards them. It is fundamental to understand that it does not aim at providing a full presentation of Christian doctrine,¹¹² nor is it addressed to Christians:

When we remember that he was not writing a theological treatise for Christians but an apology addressed to a pagan Emperor his originality is seen to be striking. Had Athenagoras written a work on the Trinity for Christians it is possible that we would possess one of the most outstanding contributions to Trinitarian theology of the ante-Nicene period of the Church.¹¹³

¹⁰⁷ The concept of ύπόστασις comes in at 24.5, with another meaning.

¹⁰⁸ For δύναμις in Athenagoras and in general in Early Christianity, cf. Edwards 2017, esp. 161–162.

¹⁰⁹ On Justin, cf. *I Apol* 13. 1 and 3. Here Jesus appears έν δευτέρη χώρη and the prophetic Spirit έν τρίτη τάξει. On Tertullian, cf. *Adv Prax*, 2: *Tres autem non statu, sed gradu; nec substantia, sed forma; nec potestate, sed specie.*

¹¹⁰ Cf. Giunchi 1998 and also Pouderon 1989, 132: "[...] établit, à notre avis, non pas une distinction hiérarchique, qui relèverait de l'hérésie, mais une distinction fonctionnelle, chacune des personnes ayant son rôle propre."

¹¹¹ *Leg. pro Christ.* 12.3.

¹¹² Cf. Pouderon 1989, 139: "C'est dire que le propos de l'apologiste n'était pas d'exposer la doctrine chrétienne, mais bien de défendre les chrétiens contre d'injustes accusations, et de montrer que le christianisme n'est pas incompatible avec la raison!"

¹¹³ Barnard 1972, 181–182.

With this in mind, we can discuss the apologists' and, in this case, Athenagoras', *presentation of God*.¹¹⁴ As stated, he shows how the Christian God is in many extents not so different from the one considered by the best Greek reflections and thoughts. He displays a substantial usage of philosophical ideas and concepts, while biblical sources are spare. The *Legatio* is even less biblical than the works of other apologists, such as Justin for instance.

Throughout the chapters of the *Legatio* we find the main insistence is on the unicity of God. That this did not sound extremely strange to the addressees is due to the fact that a certain sort of monotheism was evolving within Greek philosophy.¹¹⁵ The God presented by Athenagoras is clearly the god of the philosophers, of the (Middle) Platonic tradition but also – in Athenagoras' eclectic presentation – with traces from other schools, but filled with biblical thought.¹¹⁶ This one God is the transcendent creator and father of the universe, who also directly or indirectly provides for it.¹¹⁷ Uncreated, he is separated from matter by an abyss. Unlike this temporal material, he is eternal, impassible and perceptible only through mind and reason. In this way, Athenagoras states that Christians actually do not believe in a God different from the one that poets and philosophers have progressively discovered – not without difficulties – through a sort of 'partial inspiration'.¹¹⁸ In this sense, divine revelation through the prophets confirms and corrects the long secular speculation of poets and philosophers.

This said, in the *Legatio*, God, the Father, is said to concentrate in himself God's being (ὁ ὄντως θεός), as the sole source and origin of the other 'persons'. Pouderon sees in these rather functional emanations (λόγος-σοφία, on the one side, ἀπόρροια, on the other):

Le Père ayant droit plus que tout autre au titre de Dieu (qui n'est pourtant pas refusé au Fils, particulièrement en *L. X*, 5), il concentre sur sa personne les attributions de Dieu, comme la fonction créatrice ou la fonction judiciaire, et distribue à son Verbe et à l'Esprit d'une part, aux anges d'autre part, les fonctions cosmique, prophétique et providentielle, véritables délégations de pouvoir et de puissance – comme le montre par exemple l'emploi de la préposition *διὰ*, 'par l'intermédiaire de'.¹¹⁹

Barnard has, nevertheless, a different view:

¹¹⁴ Cf. Barnard 1970b.

¹¹⁵ Cf. Barnard 1972, 82: "in the second century, among the philosophers, the ancient polytheism of the masses had become harmonized with a kind of monotheism."

¹¹⁶ Cf. Barnard 1972, 84: "Athenagoras, to a greater extent than Justin, expressed his idea of God in philosophical terms. However, as we shall see, he was careful to adapt from Middle Platonism only what he needed for his purpose and he is able to set forth clearly the Christian conception of God as loving Creator and Father."

¹¹⁷ Cf. *Leg. pro Christ.* 10.5: "Nor does our teaching concerning the Godhead stop there, but we also say that there is a host of angels and ministers whom God, the Maker and Artificer of the world, set in their places through the Word that issues from him and whom he commanded to be concerned with the elements, the heavens and the world with all that is in it and the good order of all that is in it." See also *Leg. pro Christ.* 24.2: "So also we have recognized that there are other powers which are concerned with matter and operate through it."

¹¹⁸ Cf. *Just. 2 Apol.* 13.3.

¹¹⁹ Pouderon 1989, 136.

The lineaments of later Trinitarian orthodoxy are clearly visible in Athenagoras. Father, Son and Spirit were to him three distinct persons – a triad – and the logos-Son and the Spirit were not simply functions subordinate to the Fount of the Godhead. Athenagoras recognised the plurality of the Godhead – how the logos-Son and Spirit, while really manifested in the world of space and time, could yet abide eternally within the being of the Father.¹²⁰

Also in line with the philosophical doctrines of his time, Athenagoras introduces a Logos, who proceeds from and is with God. It has the function of an agent of God in producing and animating the world, by organizing matter, becoming the archetypical idea; in a certain sense, a δημιουργός. This account of the Logos as an explanation of creation and with a cosmic function is, however, not as developed and clearly stated with the different stages of the Logos (ἐνδιάθετος and προφορικός) as in Justin, remaining rather implicit in the *Legatio*. In addition to this, Athenagoras' use of the Logos is very reserved and its main importance is metaphysical.¹²¹ While it has been rightly stated that neither the incarnation of the Logos nor its soteriological dimension are here present, this is explained, however, by the genre and aim of the writing.¹²²

The doctrine of the Spirit is even more sparingly developed,¹²³ focusing upon prophetic inspiration and referring to some cosmic functions,¹²⁴ making the Spirit an immanent power in creation.¹²⁵ In this regard, there is not much more to observe, especially if one takes into account that the function of the animation of the world had already been attributed by Athenagoras to the Logos. Furthermore, the Spirit plays no role either in the being of each individual Christian or in the creative act.

¹²⁰ Barnard 1972, 111.

¹²¹ Cf. Barnard 1972, 96.

¹²² Cf. Barnard 1972, 102: "However Athenagoras' purpose was apologetic rather than systematic. He is defending the faith against certain calumnies and setting forth arguments for Christian theism, rather than giving a systematic account of the beliefs which he held. We should therefore be unwise to assume that he had no knowledge of, nor was uninterested in, such matters as the historic incarnation in Jesus Christ. Moreover, as we have suggested earlier, it may be that Athenagoras was aware of pagan criticisms of the founders of schools and so he presented Christianity as the 'truth' rather than as something stemming from a historical founder and his teaching."

¹²³ Cf. Pouderon 1989, 140: "Puisqu' Athénagore attribue au Verbe (Λόγος, l'équivalent du Λόγος stoïcien) la fonction d'animation, l'Esprit se retrouve bien démun! En effet chez Athénagore comme chez la plupart des Pères du ne siècle, son rôle se limite à l'inspiration prophétique; chacune des formules qui le désignent – en dehors de celle du Credo trinitaire – mentionne sa fonction inspiratrice."

¹²⁴ Cf. Barnard 1972, 105: "In comparison with this what they have to say about the Holy Spirit and the Trinity is meagre in the extreme. This was due to two reasons. In the first place the deity of the Holy Spirit raised no special problem once it was conceded that the Godhead was not unitary. So Tertullian, amid copious emphasis on the *trinitas*, bases his argument in fact on the unity and distinction of the Father and Son alone. Even as late as Apollinarius (*fides sec. part.* 18), the explanation for regarding the holy triad as one God is in terms of the relation between the Father and the Son, the argument for the unity of two persons covering the unity of three. The second reason for the slow development of theological reflection on the Spirit was the Subjective nature of His operations. The being of God as transcendent and His action in creation and redemption are more easily objectified than His presence as immanent in the human heart."

¹²⁵ Cf. Rankin 2009, 179: "In his treatment of the Spirit/Holy Spirit, Athenagoras is again concerned to articulate the way in which the supreme Creator–Father–God can remain transcendent and outside his creation and yet be fully engaged with it."

Although situated at the beginning of Christian theological and Trinitarian speculation and conditioned by being written in the genre of an apology, Athenagoras' contributions are significant. He had a better command of philosophical methods than Justin. He was a better dogmatician as well. In this regard,

Athenagoras carried theological speculation on the Trinity further than the other second-century Greek apologists in his conception of unity and fellowship or kinship within the life of the Godhead.¹²⁶

Even if many aspects are still fluid and unsettled, even if there are fundamental aspects still missing, his important achievements¹²⁷ have chiefly to do with introducing terminology that would prove fundamental in the presentation of the Trinitarian mystery,¹²⁸ becoming later on technical terms.¹²⁹ Barnard is right when he writes:

The fact that he could use so many terms, not used before, of the Godhead - ἐνότης, ἔνωσις, διαίρεσις, κοινωνία, ἀπόρροια - is very remarkable in a defence of Christianity addressed to a pagan Emperor. Had Athenagoras written a theological treatise *for Christians* it is possible that we should now possess one of the most outstanding contributions to Trinitarian theology of the pre-Nicene period.¹³⁰

In the second half of the second century, the Athenian philosopher, moved by cruel persecutions, produced a special piece of writing. In it, aiming at effecting a change of attitude of the authorities, he develops an explanation of Christian faith and ethics, in order to show that these do not substantially disagree with the best achievements of Greek

¹²⁶ Barnard 1972, 109.

¹²⁷ Barnard 1972, 182: "Athenagoras made a distinctive contribution to the more strictly defined sphere of Christian theology. He carefully avoided the pitfalls into which Justin Martyr fell in his unguarded language about the logos-Son which was open to a subordinationist interpretation. In contrast to Justin, he emphasised more the metaphysical and spiritual aspect of the logos who existed essentially and eternally within the Godhead. This approach provided a shield for an essential element in Christian theology: against the belief that the logos was a mere faculty prior to His generation from the Father for the purposes of creation and redemption. It was however in his reflection on the relationship of the persons of the Trinity, in which he went further than any other second-century thinker, that Athenagoras made his distinctive contribution to Christian theology. The Greek terms which he used for this relationship are very revealing. The Holy Spirit is the 'effulgence' or 'outflow' (ἀπόρροια) from God resembling the sun's rays. Within the inner life of the Godhead there exists between the persons unity (ἐνότης, ἔνωσις), fellowship (κοινωνία), and diversity (διαίρεσις). These later became technical terms in Trinitarian theology and in Athenagoras they appear for the first time applied to the Father, Son and Spirit."

¹²⁸ Pouderon 1989, 353–354: "La *Supplique* contient du reste plusieurs idées originales, sinon entièrement nouvelles: la réduction des personnalités divines païennes à des noms, des images, des actions ou des symboles; l'application de la théorie stoïcienne de la perception aux phénomènes surnaturels; une tentative d'explication, encore maladroite, certes, de la Trinité divine; et quelques nouveautés moindres. Elle manifeste surtout un ton propre, plein de tolérance, mais sans concession, qui forme à notre avis la caractéristique la plus remarquable de cette œuvre."

¹²⁹ Pouderon 1989, 142 has more critical views: "Ainsi donc, si l'affirmation dogmatique de la Trinité paraît tout à fait conforme à ce que sera l'orthodoxie, trois 'personnes' en une, à la fois distinctes et confondues, les divers développements sur le rôle de Dieu et de chacune des personnes qui composent la Trinité, s'en écartent sensiblement: l'on constate à la fois une tendance subordinationniste et un rejet de l'Esprit en tant que personne divine à part entière. La théologie n'en était qu'à ses débuts, et Athénagore n'était pas un esprit assez puissant pour apporter des réponses claires et satisfaisantes dans un débat qui ne faisait que s'engager."

¹³⁰ Barnard 1972, 111.

culture.¹³¹ Christianity was not unworthy of philosophy. In this regard, Christians carry on that tradition in affirming the one transcendent God and by living in accordance with him. In portraying this God, he refers also to the Logos and the Spirit – present in philosophical speculation as well – in keeping the unity (and diversity) of God. Christians are therefore within the Empire the best θεοσεβεῖς,¹³² subject to the emperors, and should expect from them the chance to be able to “lead a quiet and peaceable life”.¹³³

¹³¹ Cf. also Pouderon 1989, 130: “Athénagore a donc défini son Dieu avec le vocabulaire et selon les concepts de la philosophie: c’était une condition *sine qua non* pour ne pas détourner de lui le public philosophique et au premier rang, l’empereur. Mas ce fut sans concession; l’apologiste rend fidèlement compte de la doctrine chrétienne et de sa particularité: la trinité divine dans l’unité.”

¹³² *Leg. pro Christ.* 37.1.

¹³³ *Leg. pro Christ.* 37.2.

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