

UNIVERSITY OF GRONINGEN

STRUGGLING FOR A PLACE IN SOCIETY
AN OUTSIDER'S AND INSIDER'S PERSPECTIVE ON
CHRISTIANS ACCORDING TO THE *OCTAVIUS* OF MINUCIUS FELIX

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SUMMARY

Until quite recently, religion was the traditional category to describe Christianity in the study of early Christianity. This term, however, has been problematized and it is now generally accepted that we cannot describe early Christianity as a religion. Consequently, scholars try to describe early Christianity with other terms and they pay particular attention to the social categories of the ancient world. This study arises from an interest in how to adequately describe early Christianity when we take into account the social structure of the ancient world.

The *Octavius* of Minucius Felix is used as a window to look at the ancient world, containing both a Christian and a non-Christian view on Christianity. The central question of this study is how the Christian and the non-Christian in the *Octavius* of Minucius Felix differed in their descriptions of early Christianity. Social scientific, historical, and philological approaches are combined to study the social categories that come up in the *Octavius*.

First, the most important social categories of the ancient world are described to create a lens for this study. Then, some background information about the *Octavius* is given. The description of Christianity by the non-Christian and the Christian follows this. Finally, some conclusions are drawn.

The results show that the non-Christian described Christianity as an association, like the Bacchants, whereas the Christian seems to suggest that Christians formed a philosophical school. This study also concluded with questioning the ethnicisation that a group of scholars detect in early Christian texts.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	5
Scholarly Context.....	5
Topic of the Present Study	6
Outline of this Study.....	7
CHAPTER 1 – THE CATEGORIES OF THE ANCIENT WORLD	8
1.1 Introduction.....	8
1.2 <i>Gens</i>	8
1.3 The Household.....	9
1.4 Voluntary Association.....	10
1.5 Philosophical School	12
1.6 Summary.....	14
CHAPTER 2- THE <i>OCTAVIUS</i> OF M. MINUCIUS FELIX.....	15
2.1 Introduction.....	15
2.2 Author.....	15
2.3 Writing.....	16
2.4 Historical Context	18
2.5 Summary.....	19
CHAPTER 3 – AN OUTSIDER’S PERSPECTIVE ON CHRISITIANTY	20
3.1 Introduction.....	20
3.2 Caecilius’ Case Against Christianity	20
3.3 Caecilius’ Case Contextualized	23
3.4 The Social Category of Christianity in Caecilius’ Speech	27
3.5 Summary.....	28
CHAPTER 4 – AN INSIDER’S PERSPECTIVE ON CHRISITIANTY	30
4.1 Introduction.....	30
4.2 Octavius’ Refutation of Caecilius’ Case	30
4.3 Octavius’ Case Contextualized	36
4.4 The Social Category of Christianity in Octavius’ Speech	41
4.5 Summary.....	43
CHAPTER 5 – CONCLUSIONS: CHRISTIANITY THROUGH THE EYES OF NON-CHRISTIANS AND CHRISTIANS.....	44
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	47
Ancient Literary Sources.....	47
Books	47

Chapters	48
Articles.....	49

INTRODUCTION

Scholarly Context

Until quite recently, religion was the traditional category to describe Christianity in the study of early Christianity. This meant that Christianity and Judaism were both religions, among other Graeco-Roman religions. However, the term religion, with its current connotation, has been problematized as an ancient category.¹ The term did not exist at the time and the term *religio*, from which our term does in fact derive, meant something else.² It is now generally accepted that we cannot describe early Christianity as a religion.

This brings us to the question how Christianity is best described in the context of the ancient world. Much research has been done to answer this question and thereby scholars paid particular attention to the social categories of the ancient world. A group of scholars, among others Kloppenborg, Wilson, Ascough, and especially Harland, have turned to the voluntary association as the category that best fitted the early Christians.³ One of these voluntary associations is the philosophical school.⁴ Scholars, however, often describe this type more or less distinct from other types of voluntary associations.⁵ More recently, another group of scholars focus on ethnic reasoning in early Christian texts.⁶ This ethnic reasoning is related to the social category of *ethnos* (Latin: *gens*). There are also scholars who explore how several categories (i.e. the household and voluntary associations) played a role in the description and self-description of Christians. Many authors, however, take one particular category or treat some of the categories in their description of the early Christians. Only recently, scholars start focusing on ethnic reasoning and therefore we do not find the social category of *ethnos* in former research.⁷

¹ See e.g. Carlin A. Barton and Daniel Boyarin, *Imagine No Religion: How Modern Abstractions Hide Ancient Realities* (New York; 2016).

² Cicero, for example, explains that the term *religio* means that something was approved, see Cicero, *De natura deorum* 2.72. See also Hans Dieter Betz *et alii* (eds.), *Religion, Past and Present. Encyclopedia of Theology and Religion* Vol XI (Leiden, Boston; 2012), 33-34; Barton and Boyarin, *Imagine No Religion*, especially part one. Unless otherwise stated, all references to ancient authors are to the Loeb Classical Library.

³ John S. Kloppenborg, *Christ's Associations: Connecting and Belonging in the Ancient City* (Austin, 2019); John S. Kloppenborg and Stephen G. Wilson (eds.), *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World* (London, 1996); John S. Kloppenborg and Richard S. Ascough, *Graeco-Roman Associations: Texts, Translations, and Commentary: Attica, Central Greece, Macedonia, Thrace* (Berlin; 2011); Philip A. Harland, *Dynamics of Identity in the World of the Early Christians: Associations, Judeans, and Cultural Minorities* (New York, London, 2009) and Philip A. Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations: Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society* (Minneapolis, 2003).

⁴ See Steve Mason, 'PHILOSOPHIAI Graeco-Roman, Judean and Christian' in: Kloppenborg and Wilson, *Voluntary Associations*, 31-58.

⁵ See e.g. Robert L. Wilken, 'The Christians as the Romans (and Greeks) saw them' in: E.P. Sanders (ed.), *Jewish and Christian Self-definition* (Philadelphia 1980), 100-125; Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven and London, 1983), especially 74-110.

⁶ Studies of ethnic reasoning include: D.K. Buell, *Why this New Race: Ethnic reasoning in Early Christianity* (New York 2005); Aaron P. Johnson, *Ethnicity and argument in Eusebius' Praeparatio evangelica* (Oxford 2006); C.W. Concannon, "When you were gentiles": *Specters of Ethnicity in Roman Corinth and Paul's Corinthian Correspondence* (New Haven 2014); C.E.J. Hodge, *If Sons, then Heirs: A Study of Kinship and Ethnicity in the letters of Paul* (New York 2007); L.L. Sechrest, *A Former Jew: Paul and the Dialectics of Race* (London 2009).

⁷ Meeks does not mention *ethnos* as possible social comparison, see Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven and London, 1983), especially 74-110. Wilken

Topic of the Present Study

This study arises from an interest in how to adequately describe early Christianity when we take into account the social structure of the ancient world. The social categories of the ancient world form the framework of this study and are used to explore the question of how Christians were socially situated in the ancient world by Christians themselves and by others.

A text that is particularly well suited for our focus is the *Octavius* of Marcus Minucius Felix, since it provides a window into the ancient world. In this world the Christians formed a new minority, without political power in the first three centuries CE, and had to define themselves in relation to others. The *Octavius* offers both a Christian and a non-Christian view on Christianity. The central question of this study, then, is how the Christian and the non-Christian in the *Octavius* of Minucius Felix differed in their descriptions of early Christianity.

The study of the ancient world with the *Octavius* as a window can contribute to the understanding of the formation and the development of Christianity in the ancient world. It gives insight into how Christians were described by outsiders and how Christians responded to those descriptions and shaped their identity. It also gives more insight into the work of Marcus Minucius Felix, which is relatively understudied in academics. Another objective is to contribute to the debate about how Christianity saw itself and was seen in the first three centuries CE.

As already stated, this study is an inductive study of the *Octavius* with attention to the social categories of the ancient world. Social scientific, historical, and philological approaches are combined in order to look at the description in the *Octavius* and the social categories that come up in that writing. One of the major issues for this study is how to deal with the non-Christian voice in the dialogue. I will focus on the description by non-Christians and the self-description of Christians. The dialogue, however, is written by a Christian author. Therefore, it is important to remain aware of the possible agenda of the Christian writer who has written the dialogue.⁸ A way to counterbalance this deficiency is by comparing the arguments and opinions of the non-Christian in the *Octavius* with other non-Christians from the same period. Are the opinions plausible non-Christian opinions or only shaped by the author to make his own point? Sources that can be helpful are Justin's *Dialogue*, Celsus' *On true doctrine*, as extracted from Origen's *Contra Celsum*, and Tertullian's *Apology*, besides others. Nevertheless, one needs to remain aware of the fact that Christian sources possibly distorted their lost opponents' views.

An issue that needs clarification is the meaning of the term 'early Christianity'. With this term I refer to the first three centuries CE, the period before Constantine, in which the Christians had no political power. It was in that context that they were seen as a peculiar group and had to justify themselves as a group. Modern scholarship makes this term 'early Christianity' even more complex, because it has been shown that there were many disparate Christian groups.⁹ They all claimed some sort of allegiance to Christ, but sometimes they did not recognize other groups as 'Christian'. All these unrelated Christian groups, however, had to claim a place for themselves in the ancient world, something that was not as urgent after Christianity became officially recognized by Constantine. In

argues briefly that Christians were no people and had no history, see Robert L. Wilken, 'The Christians as the Romans (and Greeks) saw them' in: E.P. Sanders (ed.), *Jewish and Christian Self-definition* (Philadelphia 1980), 100-125, there 104.

⁸ See the evidence in chapter 2.3 below which shows that the dialogue was shaped carefully.

⁹ See for example David Brakke, *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, 2010).

this study I focus on the (writings of) Christians of Christian groups that can be seen as the precursors of today's Christianity.

Outline of this Study

In the first chapter I look at the social categories in the ancient world. What were the existing categories by which people defined and described themselves and what were the traits of these categories? This chapter serves as a framework for the categorization in the following chapters. The historical-philological and the sociohistorical method are combined and create a lens through which the *Octavius* can be studied. In the second chapter I give some background information about the *Octavius*. I will describe the author, what the text is about, and the historical context of the writing. In the third and the fourth chapters I deal with the actual words of the *Octavius*: in the third, the non-Christian description of Christianity and in the fourth, the Christian self-description. In this research the descriptions will be studied with an eye on the social categories of the ancient world, and when necessary the rhetoric of the author will be analyzed. Finally, I compare the descriptions from the third and fourth chapter and conclude with several consequences for understanding early Christianity.

CHAPTER 1 – THE CATEGORIES OF THE ANCIENT WORLD

1.1 Introduction

In the first century CE, Christ-following groups constituted a new phenomenon in the ancient world. This world was structured by several social categories, which were determining in daily life. In this chapter I describe the social categories of *gens*, the household, voluntary association, and philosophical school. These social categories describe the world in which Christians had to create a place for themselves and give a framework for the further investigation in this study.

1.2 *Gens*

‘Christianity was a newcomer’ in the ancient world ‘with no land to call its own, no history, no book recording this history and little to win admiration or engender hostility’.¹⁰ Exactly these elements were decisive when it came to socially categorizing the ancient world on a macro-level: the category of *ethnos* (Greek) and *gens* (Latin).¹¹ Everyone was part of an *ethnos* that could be traced back to stories of origins (*mythoi*), geographical situation (*patria*), laws, customs and traditions (*nomoi*, *ethe*, *nomima*, *hiera*), and its defining past.¹² In general every *ethnos* was connected with a homeland and a *metropolis*. This place ‘was the concentrated expression of the national ethos, expressed in a distinctive calendar, festivals, citizenship, civic structure, and citizenship laws. Underlying the whole was worship of one or more deities by means of animal sacrifice.’¹³

A few points must be made regarding the term *ethnos*. First, Mason has shown that in classical Greek use, *ethnos* was malleable and was applied to several levels of human population, from the inhabitants of a *polis*, such as the Athenians, to a large, undifferentiated foreign population, such as the Egyptians.¹⁴ Second, new *ethne* could be created when people were transplanted.¹⁵ Third, it was possible for an *ethnos* to lack a *metropolis* as is suggested by Pseudo-Skylax’s *Periplus* 85-106.¹⁶ The people of the Tibarenoi, for example, are mentioned without a city, although other

¹⁰ Wilken, ‘The Christians’, 104.

¹¹ See especially S. Mason, *Orientation to the History of Roman Judaea* (Eugene Oregon, 2016). He is not talking about the social-scientific category ethnicity, much less trying to define that or decide how a model did or did not fit various groups; see page 97. His interest is purely historical and philological. *Gens* is the Latin term used in more or less the same way, see below. For the Latin terms that correspond to the Greek ones, see Benjamin Hederich, *Graecum Lexicon Manuale : Primùm a Benjamine Hederico Institutum: Dein Post Repetitas Sam. Patricii Curas, Auctum Myriade Amplius Verborum: Postremo Innumeris Vitiis Repurgatum, Plurimisque Novis Significatibus Verborum Locupletatum Cura 10. Augusti Ernesti: Et Nunc Iterum Recensitum, Et Quam Plurimam in Utraque Parte Auctum a T. Morell Editio nova, prioribus longè emendatior* London: Excudit H.S. Woodfall, impensis, J.F. & C. Rivington, T. Longman, B. Law, T. Pote, J. Johnson and 14 others (London, 1790). See on the overlap between the social scientific study and the historical and philological study of *ethnos* S. Mason and Philip F. Esler, ‘Judaeian and Christ-Follower Identities: Grounds for a Distinction.’ *New Testament Studies* 63.4 (2017), 493–515.

¹² Mason, *Orientation*, 99, 107.

¹³ *Ibidem*, 107.

¹⁴ *Idem*.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, 108.

¹⁶ Text, translation and commentary in G. Shipley, *Pseudo-Skylax’s Periplus: The*

people are mentioned with their city. The general assumption in the eastern Mediterranean region by the first century, however, was that each *ethnos* had a *metropolis*.

This Hellenistic worldview was inherited by the Romans when they expanded their empire eastwards and it did not disappear in the following centuries. It is this way of mapping people we can also find in Latin writers and geographers. Tacitus, for example, investigates the origins (*initia*) of the Judaeans and delineates how they founded a city (mother-*urbs*) and dedicated a temple (*templum*) in it.¹⁷ He explains that Moses introduced new practices and customs (*ritus, instituta, mores*), which were opposed to practices of others, but followed the custom of the Egyptians in burying people.¹⁸ Other writers such as Pliny the Elder and Velleius Paterculus also describe the world on the basis of the peoples and nations (*gentes, nationes*).¹⁹

In his work, Velleius gives 'a brief synopsis of the races and nations [*gens ac natio*] which were reduced to provinces [*provinciae*] and made tributary to Rome'.²⁰ Laurence argues that epigraphical evidence suggests that ethnonyms became associated with these provinces, which were primarily governmental territories.²¹ He says that in Italy during the first two centuries CE we perhaps see 'a shift from the ethnonym representing a people to the ethnonym representing a territorial division.'²² But despite all the political changes the ethnic discourse remained much the same, until Christian writers began to reshape the lexicon more seriously.²³ Although this process has already started before the fourth century, it was from Constantine onwards that Christian authors had 'the motive, means, and opportunity to change the general shared discourse'.²⁴ For the present research I use the pre-Christian category *gens* (*ethnos*), as given above.

1.3 The Household

The most important social category on the micro-level was the household. The individual household (Greek: *oikos* or *oikia*; Latin: *domus* or *familia*) formed the basic unit in society and was broader than the family defined by kinship.²⁵ In very small villages the head of the household (the *paterfamilias*) was part of the ruling body of that place; in larger ones a strong personality and clan support were important as well to gain such a position.²⁶ In his household, the head was responsible for 'the immediate family, the slaves, former slaves who were now clients, hired laborers, and sometimes

Circumnavigation of the Inhabited World (Exeter: Bristol Phoenix Press, 2011). See also Mason and Esler, 'Judaeans and Christ-Follower', 503.

¹⁷ Tacitus, *Histories* 5.2-3. Other Latin terms that could be used are *fabula*, and *civitas*, see Hederich, *Graecum lexicon manual*.

¹⁸ Tacitus, *Histories* 5.4-5.

¹⁹ See e.g. Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 5.17; Velleius Paterculus, *History of Rome* 2.38.1.

²⁰ Velleius Paterculus, *History of Rome* 2.38.1.

²¹ Ray Laurence, 'Territory, ethnonyms and geography: the construction of identity in Roman Italy' in: Ray Laurence and Joanne Berry (eds.) *Cultural identity in the Roman Empire* (London and New York, 1998), 95-110, there 107-108.

²² Laurence, 'Territory, ethnonyms and geography', 108.

²³ Mason, *Orientation*, 111-112.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, 198.

²⁵ Meeks, *First Urban Christians*, 30; Jane F. Gardner and Thomas Wiedemann, *The Roman Household: a Sourcebook* (London and New York, 1991), 2. Gardner and Wiedemann also give the relevant Latin terms that were used in relation to the household, see *ibidem*, 3.

²⁶ Ramsay MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations: 50 BC to AD 284* (New Haven and London, 1974), 16.

business associates or tenants'.²⁷ Thus, within the household there was a hierarchical structure with the *paterfamilias* at the top and the slaves at the bottom. In addition, there were also links of kinship (*pater, frater, mater, soror, filius, filia*) and friendship, each role having its own expectations and obligations.

Archeological findings show that the physical space of a household reflected the relationships among the different members. Osiek and Balch, among others who focus on households and house churches in early Christianity, have shown that this definitely was the case for larger households, where slaves and masters lived in distinct parts of the house.²⁸ Another important element that can be extracted from archeological findings is proof of some kind of cultic practice at home. Osiek and Balch mention that '[t]he typical Roman house also included somewhere a *lararium*, a small shrine to the *lares* and *penates*, the household gods, whose worship was traditionally a daily ritual involving the entire household.'²⁹

The last point makes it difficult to distinguish between the cult of a household and the cult of a voluntary association based on household connections, as Harland does.³⁰ Although it is possible that worship of a household became more open to outsiders over time and in a sense voluntary, it would be better in most cases to speak about a household cult that was (in)directly imposed on the household by the *paterfamilias*. That the social categories of the household and voluntary association are closely related, however, is made clear by Martin when he states that 'the ubiquitous characteristic of these [immigrant] Hellenistic associations was their sense of being a household or extended family, perhaps the most fundamental mode of human social organization.'³¹

1.4 Voluntary Association

The voluntary associations, as already stated, form another social category in the first three centuries, which has been extensively studied in relation to Christianity.³² Two important works on the subject are written by Harland who on his turn refers, for example, to insights by MacMullen and Meeks.³³ In his book *Dynamics of Identity in the World of the Early Christians*, Harland gives as a basic definition of associations:

Associations were small, unofficial ("private") groups, usually consisting of about ten to fifty members (but sometimes with larger memberships into the hundreds), that met together on a

²⁷ Meeks, *First Urban Christians*, 30.

²⁸ Carolyn Osiek and David L. Balch, *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches*. (Louisville, 1997), 24-31. Cf. Meeks, *First Urban Christians*, 30.

²⁹ Osiek and Balch, *Families*, 10.

³⁰ See Harland, *Associations*, 30-32.

³¹ Luther H. Martin, 'Graeco-Roman Philosophy and Religion' in: Philip F. Esler (ed.) *The Early Christian World* Vol. I-II (London and New York, 2000), 53-79, there 59.

³² The modern sociological and anthropological use of 'voluntary association' differs somewhat from the more limited and specific 'associations' in Antiquity, see the discussion in Harland, *Dynamics of Identity*, 26-29. A list of words that designate associations can be found in J. P. Waltzing, *Étude historique sur les corporations professionnelles chez les Romains depuis les origines jusqu'à la chute de l'Empire d'Occident* Vol. 4 (Louvain, 1900), 236-242. See note 3 on other relevant studies.

³³ Harland, *Associations*; Harland, *Dynamics of Identity*; MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations*; Meeks, *First Urban Christians*.

regular basis to socialize with one another and to honour both earthly and divine benefactors, which entailed a variety of internal and external activities.³⁴

Because associations were primarily composed of non-elite people, rather than those of senatorial or equestrian rank or holders of the most important civic positions, we cannot find many traces of them in literature.³⁵ There is however an abundance of archeological material that is increasingly being analyzed and that provides us with information about these groups. The Baths of Julia Memmia in Bulla Regia, Africa, for example, dating to the late second century CE, probably show that an association used the halls for their meetings and had a chapel or a shrine for the Muses in the building.³⁶ In this place the association could have performed their internal activities, like honoring the gods (as their godly benefactors) through rituals, such as sacrifices followed by a meal.

Harland gives five types of associations, based on the profile of membership, after criticizing the older threefold typology of occupational, cultic, or burial associations, which was based on the purpose of an association.³⁷ When Harland chooses to describe associations on the basis of membership he agrees with other scholars before him, who had already criticized the older typology that was based on purpose. Kloppenborg, for example, describes associations on the basis of membership as well, although he mentions three main sources of membership: based on common household connections, shared occupation, and common cult.³⁸ Harland adds two other types of associations based on ethnic or geographical connections and neighborhood connections.³⁹ He admits that there is overlap and that several connections could play a role in the membership of a particular association but still distinguishes these five as the common types of associations. The dividing lines are not always very sharp. The types based on neighborhood and occupational connections are very close to each other, because people who shared the same profession often lived together in the same neighborhood.⁴⁰ Therefore, we must be cautious about concluding on the basis of the names of associations that they were based on different types of membership.

Harland's first type of association is determined by household or familial relationships. In this type the household was an association honoring divine or human benefactors. At the same time there could be other people that joined the association, and it is only this observation, according to me, that makes it a type of association distinct from the category of the household. Harland himself makes not very clear the difference between this type of association and the household with its own worship. He notes that the household had an influence on associations in organizational structures, for example if large local houses were adapted for communal use. Further, he mentions the familial affection (e.g. 'brother' and

³⁴ Harland, *Dynamics of identity*, 26.

³⁵ Harland, *Associations*, 52.

³⁶ Fikret K. Yegül, *Baths and Bathing in Classical Antiquity* (New York, 1992), 217-219.

³⁷ Harland, *Associations*, 27-29.

³⁸ See John S. Kloppenborg, 'Collegia and *thiasoi*: Issues in Function, Taxonomy and Membership' in: John S. Kloppenborg and Stephen G. Wilson (eds.), *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World* (London, 1996), 16-30. In his later book he adopts Harland's categories, although he sees them not as watertight compartments, see John S. Kloppenborg, *Christ's Associations: Connecting and Belonging in the Ancient City* (Austin, 2019), 24-25.

³⁹ Harland, *Associations*, 29.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, 37-38. See on this theme also Kloppenborg, *Christ's Associations*, 25.

'sister') that was also used by associations.⁴¹ This makes it difficult to distinguish between an association based on household or familial relationships and other kinds of relationships and between this type and the household. Therefore, I will focus more on the social category of household, which is a clearer category than this type of association.

The second type Harland mentions is the association with ethnic or geographic connections. People who moved to another city could come together to form an association with people from their own homeland. In Rome, for example, there were groups of Sardians as well as Ephesian shippers and merchants that met regularly.⁴² Therefore, these groups could be at the same time associations based on occupational connections.

The third type was based on neighborhood or locational connections. Terms that were used by these groups were 'settlement', 'neighborhood', and 'street'.⁴³ They could act corporately and become a group with social and religious purposes like the other associations. At the same time this type is not always clearly distinct from the next type.

The fourth type Harland describes is the occupational association or guild. There is a wide range of evidence that supports the existence of occupational associations.⁴⁴ That is why Kloppenborg focuses particularly on this type and on the one based on cultic connections.⁴⁵ Entertainment in the form of festivals was an essential aspect of the social and religious life of these guilds.⁴⁶

The fifth type that Harland mentions is the cult or temple association. Although virtually all the associations honored the gods and goddesses through offerings and rituals (sacrifices, prayers, singing, and mysteries), there were associations that drew primarily on the connections with a specific cult or sanctuary.⁴⁷ Well-known associations that were part of this type are the mystery associations that were devoted to Dionysos or Bacchus.⁴⁸

1.5 Philosophical School

The philosophical schools formed a special type of voluntary association in the ancient world. In agreement with other scholars I deal with it as a more or less distinct category.⁴⁹ This category is included by Wilken when he looks at the perspective of outside observers of Christianity and what for them 'seemed to constitute Christian identity in the years the Christian movement was first coming to public attention'.⁵⁰ He explains how outsiders saw the Christians as following a

⁴¹ Harland, *Associations*, 30-32. *Contra* Meeks, *First Urban Christians*, 85-88.

⁴² See references in Harland, *Associations*, 35 and Kloppenborg, *Christ's Associations*, 25-29.

⁴³ Harland, *Associations*, 37.

⁴⁴ See for example *ibidem*, 39-40 which focuses on Asia.

⁴⁵ Together with the cultic associations, see Kloppenborg, *Christ's Associations*, 25.

⁴⁶ Harland, *Associations*, 38.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, 44.

⁴⁸ For other cults see Martin, 'Graeco-Roman Philosophy', 66-74.

⁴⁹ Harland and Kloppenborg do not mention philosophical schools as a type of voluntary associations, see above. Mason explicitly describes the philosophical school as a voluntary association, see Mason, 'PHILOSOPHIAI' and Mason, *Orientation*. The heading on page 159 of his book, however, gives the impression that there was some difference. Wilken, Meeks, and Eshleman deal with the philosophical school as a separate category, see below and Kendra Eshleman, *The Social World of Intellectuals in the Roman Empire: Sophists, Philosophers, and Christians. Greek Culture in the Roman World* (Cambridge, 2012).

⁵⁰ Wilken, 'The Christians', 102.

superstition (*superstitio*) and impiety, the opposite of the philosophical way of life.⁵¹ After this explanation he mentions that the 'Christian apologists set out to accomplish a presentation of Christianity as a philosophical school, thereby reversing the logic which led from superstition to atheism'.⁵² Elements that reflect this presentation are, according to Wilken, the description of Jesus as teacher who taught his disciples philanthropy.⁵³ This presentation of Jesus is already visible in Luke-Acts, long before the apologists.⁵⁴

Philosophical schools are also mentioned by Meeks as a fourth model from antiquity with which Christian groups have been compared.⁵⁵ This is visible, for example, in Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho* in which Justin explains to Trypho what his idea of God and his philosophy is. He describes his way to the Platonist School and his conversation with a Christian before his conversion and then concludes:

When he had said these and many other things which it is not now the fitting time to tell, he went his way, after admonishing me to meditate on what he had told me, and I never saw him again. But my spirit was immediately set on fire, and an affection for the prophets, and for those who are friends of Christ, took hold of me; while pondering on his words, I discovered that his was the only sure and useful philosophy. Thus it is that I am now a philosopher.⁵⁶

Justin Martyr explicitly describes here his conversion to Christianity as a change of philosophical school, that is, a change to *the* philosophical school.

It is not only the ideas and patterns of language that can be compared with early Christian discourse. The philosophical schools can also offer a social model, and this is especially true for the Pythagoreans and the Epicureans, who were sometimes organized as a religious fellowship (*thiasos*) that was dedicated to the goddesses of culture.⁵⁷ In this sense it can also be argued that philosophical schools were associations that were 'devoted to the pursuit of philosophy'.⁵⁸ The central practices of a school were intellectual and related to the mind and the self or soul and focused on an understanding of a unitary good.⁵⁹ Other characterizing elements of these philosophical schools were the concerns with 'piety, simply living, contempt for suffering, and death and expectation of a certain afterlife'.⁶⁰

⁵¹ Ibidem, 107.

⁵² Wilken, 'The Christians', 108. See on the charge of atheism and the apologists' reply to it also Anders-Christian Jacobsen, 'Main Topics in Early Christian Apologetics' in: David Brakke, Anders-Christian Jacobsen, and Jörg Ulrich (eds.), *Early Christianity in the Context of Antiquity* vol.4 (Frankfurt am Main, 2009).

⁵³ Wilken, 'The Christians', 109.

⁵⁴ E.g. Luke 14.7-14, see on this theme also S. Mason, 'PHILOSOPHIAI', 31-58, especially 46-55.

⁵⁵ Meeks mentions four models: the household, the voluntary association, the synagogue and the philosophical or rhetorical school, see Meeks, *First Urban Christians*, 74-84.

⁵⁶ Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 8 in: Thomas B. Falls, *The Fathers of the Church, a New Translation* V.6 (Washington, 1965).

⁵⁷ Meeks, *First Urban Christians*, 83, with reference to Henri Marrou, *Histoire de l'éducation dans l'antiquité* (3ed. Paris, 1955).

⁵⁸ Mason, *Orientation*, 164.

⁵⁹ See on this point S.K. Stowers, 'Does Pauline Christianity resemble a Hellenistic philosophy?' in: Cameron, Ron, Merrill P. Miller, *Redescribing Paul and the Corinthians Early Christianity and Its Literature* Vol. 5 (Atlanta, 2011), 219-243, there 237.

⁶⁰ Mason, *Orientation*, 165.

1.6 Summary

In this chapter I have described some broad social categories that were important in Antiquity. They form the framework in which people were mapped by others and with which they could describe themselves to outsiders. On the macro-level *gens* was the most important category, since everyone was part of a *gens* by birth. On the micro-level the household formed the most basic unit of society. The membership of a voluntary association was part of the lives of many individuals, especially in the cities. They gathered together in houses to share a meal and to honor the patron deities in different types of associations. People that were part of an association came mostly from the non-elite. A special sub-category of voluntary association was the philosophical school, which could include slaves and freedmen but was focused on piety, simply living, and understanding of the unitary good.

CHAPTER 2- THE *OCTAVIUS* OF M. MINUCIUS FELIX

2.1 Introduction

That we know the *Octavius* of Marcus Minucius Felix is the happy coincidence that it was mistaken as book eight (*Octavus*) of Arnobius' *Adversus Nationes*. It is handed down to us in the codex Parisinus no. 1661 saec. IX and in a second manuscript, the codex Bruxellensis, which is a copy of the first codex from the sixteenth century.⁶¹ The work of Marcus Minucius Felix has not received much attention in recent scholarship. The most recent work that exclusively deals with it, other than a translation, dates back to 1967.⁶² In this chapter I first give a description of what is known about the author of the *Octavius*. Then, I mention some important elements about the work itself. Finally, I deal with the historical context of the *Octavius*.

2.2 Author

We almost know nothing about the author of the *Octavius*, except what we can extract from the work itself. The work is ascribed to Minucius Felix by Lactantius in his *Divinarum Institutionum* around 304 CE.⁶³ He links the *Octavius* with Minucius Felix in his first and fifth book of the *Divinarum Institutionum*. In Book 1.11 he delineates the birth, origin, and name of Saturn as it was transmitted by the poets and then says:

Let us therefore seek the element of truth which lurks beneath this image. In his book entitled *Octavius* Minucius Felix argues as follows [23.10–12]: 'When Saturn had been forced by his son to flee and had come to Italy, he was called son of the sky because we usually say that people whose virtue we admire or who arrive all of a sudden have arrived out of the blue; he was called son of the earth, however, because that is our title for children of parents unknown.'⁶⁴

Here it is evident that Lactantius knew the content of the *Octavius* and ascribed the work to Minucius Felix. He will link Minucius Felix and the *Octavius* again in 5.1 where he talks about scholars that came to the rescue of wisdom and truth but were inadequate to defend them. 'Among those known to me in this capacity, one notable advocate was Minucius Felix. His book, called *Octavius*, makes plain how good a vindication of truth he could have made if he had devoted himself totally to the subject.'⁶⁵

⁶¹ P.H. Damsté, *Marcus Minucius Felix met een Nederlandse vertaling* (Amsterdam, 1936), x.

⁶² C. Becker, *Der „Octavius“ des Minucius Felix. Heidnische Philosophie und frühchristliche Apologetik*, (München 1967).

⁶³ See Becker, *Der „Octavius“*, 95 and Anthony Bowen and Peter Garnsey, 'Lactantius : Divine institutes' *Translated Texts for Historians Volume 40* (Liverpool, 2003) 3.

⁶⁴ Lactantius, *Divinarum Institutionum* 1.11, translated by Bowen and Garnsey, 'Lactantius : Divine institutes', 86.

⁶⁵ Lactantius, *Divinarum Institutionum* 5.1.22. Advocate could refer back to the defense of *Divine Institutes* 5.1.21, but in 5.1.23-24 the profession of Cyprian is given and the skills of Tertullian. Therefore, it is most likely that advocate does not refer to the defense but to the work Minucius Felix was doing.

That Minucius Felix was an author is supported by the letter of Jerome to Heliodorus. Writing in 396 CE, Jerome tries to console Heliodorus for the death of Nepotianus.⁶⁶ In his letter he sketches in outline the virtues of Nepotianus and mentions that Nepotianus always gave the source of his arguments. In that way Nepotianus disclaimed any reputation for learning, but ‘came to be considered the most learned of us all’.⁶⁷ Then, Jerome gives some examples to whom Nepotianus referred. In that context Minucius Felix is mentioned next to Tertullian, Cyprian, Lactantius, Hilary, Victorinus, and Arnobius.

The *Octavius* itself offers a few clues about its author. First, it seems likely that the praenomen of Minucius Felix was Marcus, as suggested by *Octavius* 3.1 and 5.1. In 3.1 Octavius blames his brother Marcus for leaving Caecilius his friend in the darkness of ignorance. And Caecilius calls someone Marcus when he says: ‘Although you, brother Marcus, have made up your mind on the subject of our inquiry, seeing that, after careful experience of either way of life, you have repudiated the one and approved the other’.⁶⁸ This Marcus is the main character (the ‘I’) and nothing speaks against taking this man to be the author of the dialogue. Second, the last passage tells us that Minucius Felix had decided to live the Christian way of life and accepted Christianity. Third, that Minucius Felix did some advocacy is supported by the comment that ‘the vintage holidays had brought relief from judicial duties’.⁶⁹ Fourth, Minucius Felix lived and worked in Rome.⁷⁰ The fifth and last element that can be extracted from the *Octavius* is that the author knew such great ancient authors as Plato and Cicero. This is reflected in the work itself to which I now turn.

2.3 Writing

The writing of Marcus Minucius Felix bears the title *Octavius*. This is the name of one of the three figures of the book: Octavius Januaris.⁷¹ The remembrance of this ‘good and trusty comrade’, who has already passed away, sees Minucius Felix ‘reliving the past’.⁷² When he thought about his association with Octavius his ‘attention fastened above all else on that discourse of his, in which, by sheer weight of argument, he converted Caecilius, who was still immersed in superstitious vanities, to true piety’.⁷³ What follows is the reliving of the discourse in question, which took place in Ostia. The reason for the discourse was the kiss that Q. Caecilius Natalis blew to an image of Serapis.⁷⁴ Octavius blamed Minucius Felix for this and then after a while Caecilius wanted to debate with Octavius about Christianity. In this debate Minucius Felix is the arbiter who sits in between and listens carefully to both of them.⁷⁵

⁶⁶ Jerome, *Letters* 60.1.

⁶⁷ Ibidem, 60.7

⁶⁸ Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 5.1.

⁶⁹ Ibidem, 2.3.

⁷⁰ Ibidem, 2.1.

⁷¹ Cf. Ibidem, 15.2-16.1

⁷² Ibidem, 1.1.

⁷³ Ibidem, 1.5, translation taken from G.W. Clarke, *The Octavius of Marcus Minucius Felix: Ancient Christian Writers* 39 (New York, 1974).

⁷⁴ Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 3.4. See for the name Natalis ibidem, 16.1-2.

⁷⁵ Ibidem, 4.6.

The *Octavius* was inspired by the works of Plato and Cicero, as to others such as Seneca and Tertullian, and this is visible in the textual references in the dialogue.⁷⁶ In the text and translation from J.P. Waltzing these citations and references are given in the footnotes. Because of the abundance of references the *Octavius* is sometimes called a mosaic and therefore hard to treat on its own.⁷⁷ An excellent study that investigates the relationship with other authors is that of Becker.⁷⁸ His work has spread new light on how Minucius Felix wrote the *Octavius* and made sources useful for his own purpose.

One of the texts that has received special attention is the *Apology* of Tertullian. Many works that discuss the *Apology* and the *Octavius* deal with the priority question.⁷⁹ Was the *Octavius* written before Tertullian wrote his *Apology*, the other way around, or did they rely on a common source? One's answer to this question affects one's understanding of the historical context of the *Octavius*.

The *Apology* and the *Octavius* not only have significant overlaps of content; they also belong to a similar genre. Both defend Christianity against accusations by non-Christians. Tertullian, a Latin from Africa, ostensibly wrote to the magistrates of the Roman Empire to tell the truth about the Christian school (*secta*).⁸⁰ Minucius Felix defends Christianity through a dialogue in which Caecilius is convinced by the (Christian) arguments of Octavius. These works are part of a broader apologetic discourse before 325 CE. Other apologists are Cyprian, also an African, who wrote an address to Demetrianus. He defended Christianity against the claim that wars arose, plague and famine raged, and droughts came about because of the Christians.⁸¹ Someone who responded to almost the same accusations around 300 CE was Arnobius, another African.⁸² Lactantius, again an African apologist, deals with Tertullian, Minucius Felix, and Cyprian in his apologetic work *Divinarum Institutionum*.⁸³ Clearly, the *Octavius* has its place in a tradition of Christian apologetic writing.

Like the *Octavius* not only shares the contents of the *Apology*, but also its genre, this is in a similar way true for Plato's *Phaedo*. Not only its contents, but also its template is visible in the *Octavius*. *Phaedo* too opens with recounting an event that happened in the past, namely Socrates drinking the deadly poison.⁸⁴ Echecrates asks Phaedo to tell the topics of the conversations that were going on in the last hours of Socrates' life.⁸⁵ Then the dialogue between Socrates and Simmias and

⁷⁶ Cf. Mason and Esler, 'Judaean and Christ-Follower Identities', 510; Becker, *Der 'Octavius'*, 74, 94. Becker has argued how Minucius Felix used the works of Plato and Cicero for his own purpose. See for example note 79 below.

⁷⁷ Becker, *Der 'Octavius'*, 5.

⁷⁸ Becker, *Der 'Octavius'*.

⁷⁹ E.g. Clarke, *Octavius*; Damsté, *Marcus Minucius Felix*, xi-xiv; Becker, *Der 'Octavius'*, see also his list of other authors dealing with the question on page 76-77, there note 34 and 35; M.E. Hardwick, *Josephus as a Historical Source in Patristic Literature through Eusebius* (Georgia, 1989), 19-23; L. Roig Lanzilotta, 'The Early Christians and Human Sacrifice' in: Jan N. Bremmer (ed.), *The Strange World of Human Sacrifice*. Studies in the History and Anthropology of Religion 1 (Leuven/Paris/Dudley: Peeters, 2007), 81-102, there 88-94.

⁸⁰ Tertullian, *Apology* 1.1.

⁸¹ See Loeb Classical Library volume 250, xii for Cyprian as African and for the claim he challenges Cyprian, *Treatise V: An address to Demetrianus*, 2 in: A. Cleveland Coxe, *Ante-Nicene Fathers. Volume 5: Hippolytus, Cyprian, Caius, Novatian, Appendix*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. Revised and Chronologically arranged with brief prefaces and occasional notes by A. Cleveland Coxe (New York: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1886).

⁸² Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (eds.), *Ante-Nicene Christian Library: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325 Volume 19 The Seven Books of Arnobius Adversus Gentes* (Edinburgh, 1871), ix-xi, 1.

⁸³ Bowen and Garnsey, 'Lactantius : Divine institutes', 1.

⁸⁴ Plato, *Phaedo* 57a.

⁸⁵ Plato, *Phaedo*, 59c.

Cebes is reported by Plato. In this dialogue there is an interlude (88c8–91c6), just as in the *Octavius* (14-15), in which there is a turn. In the *Phaedo* Socrates builds up a positive case for the immortality of the soul, whereas in the *Octavius* Octavius answers the case of Caecilius and builds up a positive case for Christianity.⁸⁶

The dialogue of Cicero in *De natura deorum*, itself influenced by Plato's dialogues, is likewise something of a precursor to the *Octavius*.⁸⁷ Cicero describes a dialogue in which three persons take part.⁸⁸ In the first book, the Epicurean Velleius debates with the Academic Cotta. In the second book, the Stoic Balbus sets out his Stoic theology, to which Cotta responds in the third book with an Academic criticism. Like Minucius Felix, Cicero introduces the dialogue with reference to an event in the past. 'It was the Latin Festival, and I had come at Cotta's express invitation to pay him a visit. I found him sitting in an alcove, engaged in debate with Gaius Velleius'.⁸⁹ And whereas Caecilius in the *Octavius* asks Minucius Felix to act as an arbiter, Cicero says in his *De natura deorum*: '[D]on't think I have come to act as [Cotta's] ally, but as a listener, and an impartial and unprejudiced listener too, under no sort of bond or obligation willy nilly to uphold some fixed opinion'.⁹⁰ A statement that has to underline that the dialogue is accurately presented in the work of the author without changing the words of the debaters. At the end of the dialogue opinions change, like Caecilius' one in the *Octavius*. Velleius is convinced of Cotta's position, while Cicero felt 'that that of Balbus approximated more nearly to a semblance of the truth'.⁹¹

2.4 Historical Context

In the previous section we saw that the *Octavius* was part of an apologetic tradition. This leads us to the question of the historical context of the *Octavius*. Where can we place this work in the tradition? The apologetic works mentioned above are connected with the work of Minucius Felix by contents and explicit references. These other works are from African authors and may suggest that Minucius Felix was also from African origin.⁹² Besides the literary connections, this is also likely because of the manuscript that was seen as the eighth book of Arnobius' *Adversus Nationes*. Further the name of Q. Caecilius Natalis, a magistrate in 210 CE, is found in inscriptions at Cirta and not improbably is the figure identified in the dialogue.⁹³ The work itself tells about the Roman context of the dialogue and resemble a style and vocabulary that adhere more to the tradition of Cicero and Seneca than to that of Tertullian and Fronto.⁹⁴ Therefore, it is possible that the place of writing was Rome.

⁸⁶ See Loeb Classical Library volume 36, 279 and Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 16. In this interlude both *Socrates* and Minucius Felix warn the listeners for simple acceptance of the arguments. In *Socrates*' case there is the warning for hating and disparaging arguments. Minucius Felix warns for believing people because they seem to be trustworthy but also for the other extreme, that is to hate all people and do not believe them. See *Phaedo* 88c-90, *Octavius* 14.6 and Becker, *Der 'Octavius'*, 7.

⁸⁷ See Becker, *Der 'Octavius'*.

⁸⁸ Loeb Classical Library volume 268, xiii-xiv.

⁸⁹ Cicero, *De natura deorum* 1.6.15.

⁹⁰ *Ibidem*, 1.7.17.

⁹¹ *Ibidem*, 3.40.95.

⁹² Bowen and Garnsey mention it without arguments see 'Lactantius: Divine institutes', 1. See Becker for a more balanced argumentation *Der 'Octavius'*, 94, there also note 65.

⁹³ Loeb Classical Library volume 250, 307.

⁹⁴ Loeb Classical Library volume 250, 304.

The possible link with the inscription in Africa brings us to the date of the dialogue, which is argued by Becker to be most likely between 212 and 246/249 CE.⁹⁵ Before this conclusion Becker argues for the priority of Tertullian and shows that Minucius Felix dealt with the *Apology* in the same manner as the works of Plato, Seneca, and Cicero. He also shows what the problems are with the argument that Minucius Felix wrote his work before Tertullian. For example, why would Tertullian have left out the references to Plato in *Apology* 14.2ff, 23, and 48.1 (cf. *Oct.* 24.1ff, 26.12, 27.1, 34.6)?⁹⁶ According to Becker, it is more likely that Minucius Felix added references to Plato in passages from Tertullian, as he did in passages from Cicero, than that Tertullian left them out of his argument. Therefore, Becker finds it most likely that Minucius Felix has changed Tertullian's *Apology* for his own purpose. Roig Lanzillotta, who compares the *Apology* and the *Octavius* on the charges against Christianity, concludes likewise: 'This conscious reorganization of the material is, in our opinion, the clearest proof of Minucius' dependence upon Tertullian'.⁹⁷ Because the *Apology* is securely dated to 197 CE, this is a clear *terminus a quo* for the *Octavius*.⁹⁸ Becker argues that it is not likely that the *Octavius* was written before 212 CE, because of the lack of references to bloody persecution and threats in the work.⁹⁹ This argument is not convincing, however, because one might ask whether Minucius Felix would have known the threats, if they were there. As *terminus ad quem* he argues for 246/249 CE, because of the multiple references in Cyprian's work *Ad Donatum*, which is dated in 246 (to 249).¹⁰⁰

Besides the timespan of the *Octavius* and the possible place of writing in Rome (or Africa), there are no historical details we can give about the historical context of Minucius Felix and his writing.

2.5 Summary

Summing up, we can say that much is uncertain about the author, date, and context of the writing. The author of the *Octavius* is most likely Marcus Minucius Felix, who wrote the work somewhere between 197 and 246/249 CE. The work is connected with Roman Africa by other authors and the possibility of the historical reference to Q. Caecilius Natalis. A lot of the things we know, we have to extract from the *Octavius* itself. But despite the uncertainties, we have the *Octavius* and we can look into this work of how Christianity was described by Christians. The relationship with other authors and works can give us also a reasonable picture of how non-Christians could have described Christianity in the beginning of the third century. It is to this description in the work of Minucius Felix I turn in the next chapter.

⁹⁵ Becker, *Der 'Octavius'*, 74-97.

⁹⁶ In Becker's *Der 'Octavius'* the references to Minucius Felix differ, probably due to another translation.

⁹⁷ Roig Lanzillotta, 'The early Christians', 94. The argument of Roig Lanzillotta on its own, however, could also be used the other way around in favor of Minucius Felix' priority. For example, his observation that Minucius Felix' organization of his response appears to be more logical and effective than Tertullian's. However, Roig Lanzillotta's exposition corroborates Becker's argument.

⁹⁸ Robert D. Sider, *Christian and Pagan in the Roman Empire: The Witness of Tertullian*. Selections from the Fathers of the Church V.2 (Washington, D.C, 2001), 8. See also page 7 where he mentions that 'perhaps a majority of scholars assign the role [of predecessor] to Tertullian's book' instead of arguing for the priority of the *Octavius*.

⁹⁹ In 212 CE Tertullian wrote *Ad Scapulam*, in which it becomes clear that Scapula had begun persecuting Christians, see Becker, *Der 'Octavius'*, 94-95.

¹⁰⁰ Becker, *Der 'Octavius'*, 95-96.

CHAPTER 3 – AN OUTSIDER’S PERSPECTIVE ON CHRISTIANITY

3.1 Introduction

The case of the non-Christian Caecilius against the Christians starts in chapter 5 of the *Octavius* and ends in chapter 13. In his case we can see how social categories play a role in the conversation. These categories give us information about how Christians were described by outsiders.¹⁰¹

In my investigation of Caecilius’ case in *Octavius* 5-13 I will contextualize the opinion about the Christians with reference to other authors, who make similar charges and give similar examples or whose works are used by Minucius Felix. Thus, I start with an exposition of Caecilius’ case with a focus on the arguments and the social categories that are used. This description is followed by a contextualization of the argument against the Christians. Finally, I provide a reflection concerning the social category that fitted best to Christianity in the eyes of Caecilius and in a sense also in the eyes of the non-Christians in the days of Minucius Felix.

3.2 Caecilius’ Case Against Christianity

In chapter 5 Caecilius starts his speech with the statement that ‘everything is doubtful, uncertain and unsettled, everything is a matter of probability rather than of certainty’ (5.2). According to him people should therefore be indignant that certain people make confident declarations about issues that to the present day are subjects of discussion in philosophical schools (*sectarum plurimarum ... ipsa philosophia*; 5.4). That these people are the Christians becomes clear in the rest of the dialogue. Caecilius asks why there is ‘this devotion, this dread, which is superstition’ (*unde haec religio, unde formido, quae superstitio est?*; 5.7).¹⁰² If the universe is begotten by spontaneous generation of nature, then there is no need of a designer, judge or creator, as the Christians claim. And this absence of a designer can also explain (better) why the sacred and profane places, the unjust and the righteous are stroke by the thunder and wind, without distinction. It seems to Caecilius that it is therefore more credible that fortune, or chance, rules the world than that there is divine providence, an uncertain truth (5.13).

¹⁰¹ That there is some historical reality behind the charges and arguments from Caecilius is argued by Katherina Heyden, ‘Christliche Transformation des antiken Dialogs bei Justin und Minucius Felix’ in: *Zeitschrift Für Antikes Christentum* 13.2 (2009) 204-232, there 209. This historical reality is also implied by Jacobsen’s description of the aim of apology, see Jacobsen, ‘Main Topics’, 104-105.

¹⁰² According to Cicero the distinction between *religio* and *superstitio* could be made as follows: “Persons who spent whole days in prayer and sacrifice to ensure that their children should outlive them were termed ‘superstitious’ (from *superstes*, a survivor), and the word later acquired a wider application. Those on the other hand who carefully reviewed and so to speak retraced all the lore of ritual were called ‘religious’ from *relegere*, like ‘elegant’ from *eligere*, ‘diligent’ from *diligere*, ‘intelligent’ from *intellegere*; for all these words contain the same sense of ‘picking out’ (*legere*) that is present in ‘religious.’ Hence ‘superstitious’ and ‘religious’ (*religioso*) came to be terms of censure and approval respectively.” Cicero, *De natura deorum* 2.72; *De natura deorum* 1.117; Wilken, ‘The Christians’, 104-107. I have translated *religio* with ‘piety’ or ‘devotion (of the gods)’.

In chapter 6 Caecilius builds upon the foregoing conclusion and states that because there is 'either fortune, whose character we know, or nature, whose character we do not know', it is better for the Christians to embrace the system taught by their ancestors and not to make an opinion of their own on deities (6.1). And this is according to Caecilius the reason why every people (*gentiles*) worship their local gods, and, he adds, the Romans all of them. This addition about the Romans is a way to state the victorious position of the Romans. They achieved dominion over the nations by adopting the rituals of those nations (*gentium*). And this dominion over other people is proof of the value of Roman piety.

In chapter 7 Caecilius adds more proofs of the value of the Roman piety. According to him, every religious ritual was 'to repay divine favor, avert impending wrath or to placate the actual rage and fury of the gods' (7.2). After he has given some examples that make this clear, he argues that, if one thinks that the examples are merely folk myth, attention should be given to the sanctity of the temples and sanctuaries of the gods. It is because of the presence of the gods in them that seers have a foretaste of the future.

As a conclusion of the foregoing discussion, Caecilius states in chapter 8 that although the origin and nature of the immortal gods may remain obscure, their existence is agreed upon by all nations. Therefore Caecilius cannot tolerate someone who audaciously and irreligiously wants to break down this ancient, useful, and salutary devotion of the gods (8.1). As examples he mentions Theodorus of Cyrene and Diagoras of Melos, the latter named an atheist in antiquity. Their sham philosophies will not have the name and authority of real philosophies according to Caecilius. He then turns to the Christians, who also want to break down the ancient devotion of the gods. Caecilius mentions that they despise the gods and are gathered as an illicit gang (8.4 *inlicitae ... factionis*).

What follows is a description of the gang of Christians. They form as illiterates from society and credulous women together, a rabble of conspirators. They are a tribe (*natio*) that is secret and shuns the light (8.4). They do not speak in the open, but gabble away in corners. They despise the temples, spit after the gods, sneer at the rites, pity the priests, and scorn the purple robes of public offices. This shows the audacity of the Christians, which Caecilius cannot tolerate. He adds to this the unbelievably insolent attitude of the Christians, who do not fear present tortures but do fear the death after death.

It is clear from chapter 8 that Caecilius does not tolerate the Christians. Therefore he states in chapter 9 that 'they must be torn out' (9.1). In this chapter he gives some further evidence about the abominable nature of the group. He states that people who have hardly met each other love each other and are united in a devotion of lust. This is visible in their calling each other brothers and sisters, and turning ordinary fornication into incest. In this way the superstition (*superstitio*) even glorifies crime, according to Caecilius. After this charge against the Christians, rumor, as a shrewd informant, gives more charges, which must contain some underlying truth. Caecilius then goes on with a summation of the Christians' alleged reverence for the head of an ass, the worship of the genitals of the pontiff, which may be untrue, he acknowledges, but befits the nocturnal rites. Also the reverence of Christ, a criminal punished with death on the cross, is mentioned. Then Caecilius tells about the reported initiation of neophytes (*initiandis*): that they have to kill a harmless baby, covered over with flour, and then drink its blood and eat its body (9.5). After this, he turns to the banquets (*convivio*) and explains how incest is committed in darkness after the banquet (9.6-7).

Caecilius remarks that he could utter more charges but does not do it, because the foregoing are sufficient to make his point. According to him, the truth of practically all of these charges is shown by the obscurity of this perverted piety (*pravae religionis*) (10.1). Otherwise they would make

their practices public. Because they have no altars, temples, publicly-known images, never speak in the open, and assemble in secret, they deserve punishment and must be ashamed of what they worship. After this statement Caecilius goes on with an attack against the Christian god and asks why no free nation or superstition in Rome (*gens libera ... Romana superstitio*) has knowledge of this god (10.3-4). In that context he refers to the 'wretched tribe of the Judaeans' (*Iudaeorum ... misera gentilitas*), which at least worshipped its one god in the open (10.4). Another strange fact about the god of the Christians is that according to their doctrine he is present everywhere, because he pries into the morals and actions of all men.¹⁰³

This notion forms the bridge to the threat of conflagration for the whole world, a threat uttered by Christians, which is insane in the eyes of Caecilius. He cannot believe that the eternal order could be destroyed. And, he says, they add old wives' tales to this and tell us that they are born again after death. This is enough to establish that the Christians are the wicked. And because the Christians say that all their actions are due to God, what others similarly describe to fate, this means that it is not of their own free will that people join the Christian school (*sectae*) but by election. And this means that the Christian judge (God) is unjust and punishes people for their lot (11.6). Going back to the subject of the resurrection, Caecilius inquires whether people would have bodies when they arise. He then concludes that Christians have rehashed the poets' fairytales and have applied it to their god.

In chapter 12 Caecilius turns to the present situation of the Christians. He first mentions the evils that are common to all, but then focuses on the specific situation of the Christians. For them there are threats, torments, tortures with crosses and fire. And in that situation their god does not help them. Caecilius uses this to bring forward the greatness of Rome again by saying that the Romans had without the help of the Christian god acquired her dominions and empire (12.5). He then exhorts the Christians to take part in the life of the citizens after he has summarized all the things in which Christians did not partake: shows (*spectacula*), processions (*pompis*), public banquets (*convivia publica*), sacred games (*sacra certamina*), the use of dedicated food and drinks (*praecerptos cibos et delibatos altaribus potus*), and perfumes for the body (*odoribus*) (12.5-6). Their abstinence results in no enjoyment of life and waiting for a new life, which will never come. According to Caecilius, the Christians should therefore fix their eyes on where they walk and not pry into the tracks of heaven. Because 'those who are not privileged to understand things civic [*civilia*] are still less qualified to discuss things divine' (12.7).

This advice and statement are developed further in chapter 13 where Caecilius advises that if anyone from the Christians wants to philosophize, he should try to imitate Socrates. Because Socrates had learned that he knew nothing and therefore was not concerned with questions about the heavens. And it is also Caecilius' feeling that what is doubtful, should be left in doubt. As a consequence neither old wives' superstition (i.e. Christianity) should be promoted nor should all devotions to gods be destructed as the Christians do. This is the conclusion from Caecilius' speech and the theme with which he started his speech in chapter 5.

¹⁰³ Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 10.5, this is the first time that the term *Christianus*, here the plural form *Christiani*, is used.

3.3 Caecilius' Case Contextualized

The case of Caecilius against the Christians is written by Minucius Felix and therefore has a specific rhetorical function. Although these specific charges against Christianity are mentioned and structured in the way I presented above, it does not follow that there is no historical reality behind these charges. They do not have to be pure rhetorical inventions by Minucius Felix, but might reflect actual charges uttered against the Christians.¹⁰⁴ This historical reality would also make a more realistic and convincing argument in the dialogue of Minucius Felix for his readers. Therefore, it is important to contextualize the words of Caecilius' speech.

As I have already said, the dialogue does reflect content from other works, such as that of Cicero.¹⁰⁵ It is his *De natura deorum*, which is intensively used by Minucius Felix in the speech of Caecilius. Caecilius' starting point about the uncertainty of all things is similar to Cicero's Academic position in *De natura deorum* 1.12: 'Our position is not that we hold that nothing is true, but that we assert that all true sensations are associated with false ones so closely resembling them that they contain no infallible mark to guide our judgement and assent.' In his following explanation about how the universe could have come into existence, Caecilius follows Velleius, the atomist and Epicurean, for whom chance was important. After this, Caecilius exhorts the Christians to embrace the system that was taught by their ancestors. In this way he follows the position of Cotta, the Academic and traditionalist. The exhortation does not follow logically from the foregoing discussion and could show how Minucius Felix wanted to combine Velleius' and Cotta's position into one person and thereby create a weaker position for the non-Christian. But it was possible to be sceptical in theory and traditionalist in practice, as Lieberg has shown.¹⁰⁶ In *De natura deorum* Cotta replies to Balbus:

This no doubt meant that I ought to uphold the beliefs about the immortal gods which have come down to us from our ancestors, and the rites and ceremonies and duties of religion. For my part I always shall uphold them and always have done so, and no eloquence of anybody, learned or unlearned, shall ever dislodge me from the belief as to the worship of the immortal gods which I have inherited from our forefathers.¹⁰⁷

It was because Cotta saw the authority of the forefathers as a source superior to philosophy with regard to religious matters that he promoted the traditional practices.¹⁰⁸ And this is also reflected in the exhortation of Caecilius.¹⁰⁹ Another example of the importance of the ancestral customs is visible in the charge against the Christians, uttered around 175 C.E. by Celsus:

I shall ask them whence they come, and whom they regard as the originator of their ancestral customs. They will reply, no one, because they spring from the same source as the Jews

¹⁰⁴ See note 93. According to Heyden the dialogue itself is fictive, see Heyden, 'Christliche Transformation', 220.

¹⁰⁵ See chapter 2.3 above.

¹⁰⁶ Godo Lieberg, 'Die römische Religion bei Minucius Felix' in: *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* 106.1 (1963), 62-79, there 64-71.

¹⁰⁷ Cicero, *De natura deorum* 3.5.

¹⁰⁸ Lieberg, 'Die römische Religion', 69.

¹⁰⁹ This exhortation is repeated as a charge in the following chapters, e.g. 'They despise our temples ... they spit after our gods, they sneer at our rites' in Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 8.4.

themselves, and derive their instruction and superintendence from no other quarter, and notwithstanding they have revolted from the Jews.¹¹⁰

And at the end of the third century, Arnobius defends the Christians against the same charge.¹¹¹ These examples make clear that the charge against the Christians that they forsook the ancestral customs is a longstanding charge against the Christians. Other more specific charges against the Christians that are uttered by Caecilius, after he has given proofs of the value of the Roman customs, are also reflected in the broader literature of the second and third century.

First, Caecilius calls the Christians an illicit gang that consists of people from the lowest dregs of society and gullible women (8.3-4). This illegitimacy reflects an order that we know from Pliny the Younger's letter to the emperor Trajan. There it becomes clear that around the second century for a certain amount of time gatherings were prohibited (*hetaerias esse vetueram*).¹¹² This affected the Christian practice in those days. In this same letter we can read about an ordinary meal of a harmless kind (*innoxium*), a notion that can refer to the same practice as Caecilius does when he says that harmless (*innoxios*) blows are given to a baby that is eaten afterwards.¹¹³ This charge of cannibalism is a statement that was made more often, we see in other apologists, e.g. Origen and Tertullian.¹¹⁴ Furthermore, this charge was not uncommon in the ancient world, as it was also made against the Judaeans by Apion.¹¹⁵ That the Christians formed a gang of people from the lowest dregs of society and gullible women is challenged by the letter of Pliny, which speaks of 'a great many individuals of every age and class, both men and women, are being brought to trial'.¹¹⁶ And therefore this element is more likely a rhetorical statement rather than a historical one, the kind of rhetorical statement that we also find in the work of Origen and in a same vein in Cicero's *De natura deorum*.¹¹⁷ Pliny and Caecilius do agree on the matter of how Christianity can be described; according to both of them it is a depraved superstition (*superstitionem pravam*).¹¹⁸ Pliny is assuring the emperor Trajan that the Christians can be brought back to the ancestral customs, because these customs are restored now after a period of degeneration. The superstition of the Christians could be rooted out, just as Caecilius wishes.

A second charge against the Christians made by Caecilius is that they practice incest (9.2). An element that contributed to this charge is the way in which Christians spoke to one another. They called each other brothers and sisters. This practice was, however, not new in the ancient world. To call someone a brother or sister was not uncommon between friends or unacquainted people.¹¹⁹ And as we have seen in chapter 2, these terms were also used in households (and household associations). This greeting, however, is used by Caecilius as a charge, something that is also present

¹¹⁰ Celsus according to Origen, *Contra Celsum* 5.33. All references to Origen are taken from www.earlychristianwritings.com.

¹¹¹ Arnobius 2.66-67, all references to Arnobius are taken from Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (eds.), *The Seven Books of Arnobius Adversus Gentes': Ante-Nicene Christian Library* Vol.19 (Edinburgh, 1871).

¹¹² Pliny the Younger, *Epistles* 10.96.7-8.

¹¹³ Ibidem, 10.96.7 and Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 9.5.

¹¹⁴ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.27 mentions this as a charge made by Judaeans. Tertullian, *Apology* 8.2 does share more details about this cannibalism with the *Octavius* and could be a source for Minucius Felix in this case.

¹¹⁵ Josephus, *Against Apion*, 2.91-96.

¹¹⁶ Pliny, *Epistles*, 10.96.9, see also the discussion in Meeks, *First Urban Christians*, 51-73 that substantiates this.

¹¹⁷ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.24; Cicero, *De natura deorum*, 2.74.

¹¹⁸ Pliny, *Epistles*, 10.96.8; Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 10.1. In the *Octavius* Caecilius uses *pravae religionis obscuritas*, using *religio* in an ironic way.

¹¹⁹ See e.g. Horace, *Epistles*, 1.6.54. More references are given by Clarke, *Octavius*, 176.

in Tertullian's *Apology*, where Tertullian blames his opponents for being bad brothers.¹²⁰ The major point of Caecilius is, however, the incest allegedly practiced by Christians. According to Origen, this charge comes from the Judaeans, just like the charge of cannibalism.¹²¹ He says that the accusation was still believed by some people in his own time, although many would not believe it.¹²² This charge of incest was also known by Tertullian, who responds to it in *Ad Nationes* 1.16.¹²³

Not all the charges that are informed by rumor (*sagax*) can be traced back to a clear historical origin. The claim that Christians did reverence to the head of an ass is similar to the accusation made of the Judaeans with which Josephus deals in his *Against Apion* 2.80 and 2.113-120.¹²⁴ It is likely that this charge was passed onto the Christians. In any case, this is the explanation by Tertullian in his *Apology*. He refers to Tacitus' account about the worship of the ass by the Judaeans when he deals with the charge that the Christian god is an ass.¹²⁵ In the *Octavius*, Caecilius gives no historical background for this consecration, because he does not know it. According to him Christianity is a devotion (*religio*; 9.3) worthy and born from such morals (i.e. consecrating asses). Here, again, *religio* should be taken as an ironic description of Christianity.¹²⁶

A second charge that is informed by rumor is the worship of the genitals of the pontiff and priest. This charge against the Christians is not found elsewhere. A background for this charge is unknown to us, although there could be one.¹²⁷ In any case, Minucius Felix will return this charge to Caecilius in chapter 28.10. This makes it an effective rhetorical element in the dialogue.

The next charge about the veneration of a man who was punished as a criminal and the wood of the cross is an allusion to Christ, who was crucified. Origen deals with this same charge when he refers to Celsus, who 'acts like the most contemptible enemies of the Gospel, and like those who imagine that it follows as a consequence from our history of the crucified Jesus, that we should worship those who have undergone crucifixion!'¹²⁸ Other authors mention similar charges.¹²⁹ The veneration of the cross is also described in Tertullian's *Apology* 16.6-8, which very likely forms the background for the charges mentioned in this chapter by Caecilius.

When Caecilius turns to the charge of cannibalism, he mentions this in the context of the initiation rite. Together with the following charge about the incest in the dark after the banquets, it reminds one of the rites of Bacchus, described by Livy. He explains how drinks aroused passions and were followed by violence and fornication.¹³⁰ This was kept silent for outsiders of the cult (*cultus*), just as Christians pledged mutual silence according to Caecilius (9.5). In a speech of the consuls,

¹²⁰ Tertullian, *Apology*, 39.7.

¹²¹ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.27.

¹²² Idem.

¹²³ Tertullian, *Ad Nationes*, 1.16, see for references to *Ad Nationes* www.earlychristianwritings.com.

¹²⁴ See also Tacitus, *Histories* 5.3.

¹²⁵ Tertullian, *Apology*, 16.1-5, with reference to *Histories* 5.3.

¹²⁶ See also note 118 above.

¹²⁷ See Clarke, *Octavius*, 218, there note 119; Benko discusses the Gnostic-Christian Phibionites in the context of the charge of libertinism and sexual excess, see Stephen Benko, *Pagan Rome and the Early Christians* (Bloomington, 1984), 54-74.

¹²⁸ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 2.47.

¹²⁹ Lucian, *De morte peregrini* 11 and Arnobius, *Ad Gentes* 1.36.

¹³⁰ Livy, *History of Rome*, 39.13.10; 39.16.6-13.

described by Livy, the Bacchantes are mentioned a depraved devotion (*prava religio*), as the Christians were seen in the eyes of Pliny and Caecilius.¹³¹

After the foregoing charge, the Christians are compared with the Judaeans (*Judaeorum gentilitas*).¹³² For Christians and Judaeans share the practicing of worshipping only one god, but the Judaeans did it in the open with temples, altars, sacrifices, and ceremonies (10.4). That they are now captives of the Romans shows that their god was not able to vindicate them. The argument that subjection to foreign power proves the ineffectiveness of one's god we know in similar form from Josephus.¹³³ So the comparison with the Judaeans confirmed that even the people who are more like the Christians, still worship in the open with well-known forms. They are, after all, a *gens*. The Christians are not. They are strange people and their god is, just like the Judaeans' god, powerless. Furthermore, Caecilius questions the omnipresence of the Christian god, which is impossible in the eyes of Caecilius. This theme was also discussed in philosophical schools as becomes clear in the *De natura deorum* where the Epicurean Velleius says that the Stoics 'have saddled us with an eternal master, whom day and night we are to fear; for who would not fear a prying busybody of a god, who foresees and thinks of and notices all things, and deems that everything is his concern?'.¹³⁴

Caecilius adds to the prying god of the Christians the threats they utter about the conflagration of the entire universe (11.1). This threat appears from the earliest Christian texts (1 Thessalonians 1.10, 5.3; cf. 2 Peter 3.7), but also in other literature in the early ecclesiastical tradition like the *Shepherd of Hermas*. Celsus ridicules this when he says that 'It is folly on their part to suppose that when God, as if He were a cook, introduces the fire (which is to consume the world), all the rest of the human race will be burnt up, while they alone will remain' and adding, 'What sort of human soul is that which would still long for a body that had been subject to corruption?'.¹³⁵ This point of resurrection is mentioned by Caecilius too as a ridiculous idea.

In his discussion about the resurrection of the body after the conflagration, Caecilius brings to the fore that if all our human actions are due to God, as the Christians say, then it is not by free will that people join the Christian school (*secta*, 11.6). This leads to the conclusion that God is unjust to resurrect only Christians. A charge against the resurrection is also the historical evidence that is lacking. We know by the works of Justin, Origen and Lactantius that these charges were made indeed.¹³⁶

Caecilius then presents the present situation of the Christians as a proof of their deception. Poverty is mentioned as a proof of God's weakness and the more general infirmity that is experienced in danger and sickness. Then Caecilius turns to the specific Christian situation that for them there are 'threats, torments, tortures, crosses —not to be adored but endured—, and fire —foretold and feared by them—'.¹³⁷ These experiences are also recorded by others. Tacitus for example mentions the crosses for Christians and the burning of Christians after Nero blamed them

¹³¹ See note 118 above on the ironic use of *religio* and on the comparison with the Bacchantes Robert M. Grant, 'The social setting of Second-Century Christianity' in: E.P. Sanders (ed.), *Jewish and Christian Self-definition* (Philadelphia 1980), 16-29, there 17-18; Benko, *Pagan Rome*, 11-12; Livy, *History of Rome*, 39.16.6.

¹³² Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 10.4.

¹³³ Josephus, *Against Apion* 2.125. See Clarke on *Octavius* 10.4 for the same reference, although his reference should be to 2.125 instead of 2.215.

¹³⁴ Cicero, *De natura deorum*, 1.54-55. See also Cicero, *De natura deorum*, 3.93.

¹³⁵ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 5.14.

¹³⁶ Justin, *Apology*, 1.19; Origen, *Contra Celsum* 2.16; Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* 7.22.

¹³⁷ Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 12.4.

for burning down Rome.¹³⁸ According to him, the reason was not so much the arson as their hatred of the human race (*humani generis*).¹³⁹ We also know that Pliny punished Christians and executed them.¹⁴⁰ Tertullian speaks about punishments with fire, crosses, and beasts.¹⁴¹ Because we do not know the precise historical situation we cannot say to which (possible) historical event these words refer. There were in any case historical situations in which these threats and torments were part of the Christian life.

Part of the present situation of the Christians, which is given by Caecilius, is their absence at public banquets, processions, sacred games etc. (12.5-6). This phenomenon is also documented by Tertullian, Cyprian and Origen, who quotes Celsus.¹⁴² Caecilius' advice is to enjoy and to focus on all the things of the public life. When the Christians listen to this advice, they follow the example of Socrates, who would have said that 'what is above us is of no concern of us'.¹⁴³

3.4 The Social Category of Christianity in Caecilius' Speech

In the previous section we have seen that the charges and the situation of the Christians given by Caecilius are also mentioned by other authors. This strengthens the possibility that many charges reflect, to a certain extent, the charges that were uttered by non-Christians in the days of Minucius Felix. It is now that we can turn to the social categorization of Christianity by Caecilius. With some caution we can suggest that this categorization reflects how non-Christians saw Christianity.¹⁴⁴

What becomes clear from the speech of Caecilius is that Christians were leaving behind their ancestral customs: the sacrifices, public banquets, games, and gods. These customs had a great impact on everyday life and were despised by Christians. Caecilius calls the Christians to return to these ancestral customs. The social category of *gens* is therefore only used as a description of what the Christians have left behind. They do not live according to their *gens* as they should. The Christians are compared to the Judaeans when Caecilius asks the question why neither a free *gens* nor a Roman *superstitio* has knowledge of the unique god of the Christians. The Judaeans worshipped also only one god but in the open, in temples with sacrifices. The Christians, however, do not worship their god in public. Even the god of the Judaeans does not have power, because the Judaeans are captives of Rome. The Judaeans are here mentioned because they worship also one god, not because the Christians are also seen as a *gens*. We conclude that the Christians were not seen as a *gens* by Caecilius, but were seen as people who despised their ethnic identity.

Caecilius compares Christians with philosophers. In chapter 8 the Christians are compared with Theodorus of Cyrene and Diagoras of Melos, who had a pretended philosophy in which they stated that there were no gods. The Christians are comparable to them in so far as they too tried to weaken or destroy the piety towards the gods according to Caecilius. This is not the only occasion that philosophy comes to the front. Already at the start of his case against the Christians had

¹³⁸ Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44.

¹³⁹ *Idem*.

¹⁴⁰ Pliny, *Epistles*, 10.96.

¹⁴¹ Tertullian, *Apology* 49.4.

¹⁴² *Ibidem*, 35.2, 38.4; Origen, *Contra Celsum* 8.21; Cyprian, *Ad Donatum* 7.

¹⁴³ Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 13.1; see for the discussion of this passage Clarke, *Octavius*, 240-241, there note 166.

¹⁴⁴ See also note 101 above.

Caecilius mentioned philosophical questions about the certainty of knowledge and the nature of the universe that is debated in the philosophical schools. Because it is still a problem discussed in philosophical schools, it is outrageous in the eyes of Caecilius that the Christians had a dogmatic judgement about the nature of the universe. To this point he returns at the end of his speech, when he says 'should any of you simply have to philosophize, I urge him, if he is so audacious, to imitate, if he can, that prince of wisdom, Socrates'.¹⁴⁵ According to Caecilius, Socrates was ranked before all others, because 'he had learnt that he knew nothing'.¹⁴⁶ And it is this hesitancy that is also present in the Academic school, which should be emulated by all. For judgement in a case that is doubtful, like the nature of the universe, in favor of either side gives the danger of promoting an old wives' superstition or destruction of all true piety (13.5). And Caecilius has argued that the Christian belief is exactly this promotion and destruction. We may conclude that according to Caecilius the judgement about the nature of the universe makes Christianity different from the philosophical schools where it is still under investigation and deliberation. Christianity is more like a 'wannabe' philosophy, in the vein of Theodorus' and Diagorus' theories.

The Christian group is explicitly called a *factio*, a gang of people from the lowest dregs of society. This term *factio* could be used for associations in the ancient world and do suggest that Christianity (or a Christian group) was probably seen as an association.¹⁴⁷ This possibility is the more likely, because of the charges against the Christians. Those charges reflect some charges that were made against, for example, the Bacchants too.¹⁴⁸ Both were seen as an obscure group, both practiced cannibalism and fornication (at the initiation rite). What happened during their banquets was not publicly known and both groups were called a depraved piety. It is true that certain parts of the charges were also made against, for example, the Judaeans, but still the similarities with the cult of Bacchus are striking. The most important difference between the similarity with the Judaeans and the Bacchants is the initiation rite of new people, which is characteristic of an association. Another important difference is the obscurity of the practices of the Bacchants and the Christians and the openness of the Judaeans practices, as Caecilius also states in his speech (10.4).

A recurring term used of the Christians in Caecilius' speech is *superstitio*.¹⁴⁹ It is impossible, however, to connect this term with a specific social category. It is a normative judgement about the beliefs and practices of people. It distinguishes between the approval or disapproval of opinions and practices.¹⁵⁰ For that reason it could be used for nations and associations. Therefore, we must conclude that in the speech of Caecilius the Christians were most likely seen as an obscure association with some philosophical claims.

3.5 Summary

In sum, we can say that Caecilius builds up a case against Christianity and at the same time promotes the ancestral customs, especially those of Rome. He describes Christianity as a superstition, which has left behind the valued customs of the forefathers. We have seen that Caecilius is not alone in

¹⁴⁵ Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 13.1.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, 13.2.

¹⁴⁷ Waltzing, *Étude historique*, 239.

¹⁴⁸ See note 131 above.

¹⁴⁹ It is used in Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 5.7, 9.3 and 13.5, the beginning, the center and the end of the speech.

¹⁵⁰ See also note 102 above.

making such charges against the Christians and that many are shared by others. This contextualization makes it not unlikely that Minucius Felix has given a representative view of Christianity by (some) non-Christians in his description of Caecilius' case. Christianity is not described as a *gens*, a household, or a philosophical school, but more as an association like the Bacchants: a group of people with obscure practices and rituals, which separated itself from society.

CHAPTER 4 – AN INSIDER’S PERSPECTIVE ON CHRISTIANITY

4.1 Introduction

When Caecilius has made his case against the Christians, Marcus Minucius Felix responds and warns of the falsehood that may lie in what seems to be truth. According to him, Caecilius and Octavius should not be deceived by the other’s eloquence. Caecilius answers that Minucius Felix is intervening the debate and deserting the duties of a conscientious judge (15.1). Subsequently Minucius Felix gives space to Octavius to respond to the charges that were made. Octavius starts in chapter 16 with his defense of Christianity and finishes it in chapter 38. In his speech we can see, as in Caecilius’ oration, the social categories underpinning the conversation.

In this chapter I deal with Octavius’ speech as I did with Caecilius’. First, I describe Octavius’ argument in reply to Caecilius. Then, I contextualize his speech in relation to other (non-)Christian authors. Finally, I offer a reflection on the social category that best fitted Christianity in the eyes of Octavius and in a sense also in the eyes of certain Christians in the days of Minucius Felix.

4.2 Octavius’ Refutation of Caecilius’ Case

Before Octavius deals with the specific charges against the Christians stated by Caecilius, he responds to the overall argument. Octavius argues that Caecilius is like a man at an intersection who does not choose one path but does not decide either that all paths are right (16.3). Octavius wants to resolve the doubt and perplexity of Caecilius by countering his arguments. In this way he will prevent Caecilius from inconsistencies in the future. Octavius then counters the charge of his brother (*frater*) Caecilius that men lacking in education, money, and skill should not debate about the heavens (*inlitteratos, pauperes, inperitos*; 16.5).¹⁵¹ First, the capacity to reason is implanted by nature and not acquired by money. The philosophers were, for example, born common men (16.5; *philosophos*). Second, Octavius contends that it is not the status of one who argues that is important but the truth of his argument. Third, he claims that when rhetorical skill is absent, the speech can only rely on the standard of truth, which is the only necessary thing (16.6; *recti regula*).

In chapter 17 Octavius confirms one of Caecilius’ main principles: that man ought to know himself.¹⁵² But according to Octavius this cannot be done without an investigation of the whole universe. He explains this with an analogy that you cannot devote yourself to the duties of a citizen (*civis*) unless you have some knowledge of the city-state, of the world (*hanc communem omnium mundi civitatem*; 17.2). That man is meant for the investigation of the whole universe is clear from his upright posture, which differs from that of the beasts, as its gaze is directed towards the heavens. Octavius is convinced that men do not possess reason or any sense when they see the universe as random bits and pieces and not as a divine work (17.3). That there is a divine creator becomes evident when one observes the universe with the sun, moon and stars, the seasons, and the human body. Also the possibility of perceiving these things calls for a supreme intelligence and reason.

¹⁵¹ See for the charge Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 8.3-5.

¹⁵² See for Caecilius’ principle *ibidem*, 5.5.

The argument about a divine creator is prolonged in chapter 18. There Octavius argues that when one sees a house (*domus*) that is orderly and well-kept, one assumes that there must be a master (*dominus*) in charge of it. Likewise, one must believe, upon seeing the house of the world with all its order, law, and providence, that there is a master of the universe, one that surpasses the separate parts of the whole world (18.4). Octavius then turns to the question of whether the world is ruled by one or many. He uses the analogy of earthly empires, bees, flocks, and herds to show that there is only one god, ruler of all, that exists (18.5-7). He concludes his argument with the attributes of god, in a negative form, and with the statement that we must not pretend to know the magnitude of God or seek a name for God (18.10). For this last point he claims universal agreement because the common people simply say 'god'.

Octavius gives further proofs for the existence of a unique father of gods and men, and that God is mind and spirit when he turns to the poets (19.1-2). References to the poets are followed by references to philosophers, which show that in essence they agree with this opinion (19.3-15). He mentions several philosophers who substantiate the philosophical belief in monotheism and ends with a reference to Plato's *Timaeus* where Plato says that it is impossible to describe God to the general public (19.15). In this way the last reference refutes at the same time the charge about the silence of the Christians.¹⁵³

Octavius leaves it up to others to decide from the foregoing summation whether present-day Christians are philosophers, or philosophers from the past were already Christians (*aut nunc Christianos philosophos esse aut philosophos fuisse iam tunc Christianos*; 20.1). The philosophical view that sees the world as ruled by providence and the will of a unique god, however, means that the ignorant generations (*antiquitas inperitorum*) do not have the right to drag the Christians into the mistake of agreeing with them (20.2). These generations are refuted by their own philosophers, who are supported by the authority of reason and ancient tradition (*rationis et vetustatis adsistit auctoritas*; 20.2). Octavius thus refutes Caecilius' claim about the value of ancient tradition (chapter 6.3).

What follows is an attack on the convictions of the ancestors (*maioribus*; 20.3). One is that men were transformed into birds. Octavius argues that 'if such wonders did happen, they would happen; as they cannot happen, then they did not happen'.¹⁵⁴ Octavius then applies comparable epithets to the ancestors that Caecilius applied to the Christians in 12.7. Thereafter he claims that before the native rituals and manners were exchanged with other nations, every nation revered its own people (*antequam gentes ritus suos moresque miscerent, unaquaeque natio ... venerabatur*; 20.6). Octavius substantiates this last claim in chapter 21,¹⁵⁵ where he says that people will come to the same conclusion when they read the historians and philosophers. Octavius mentions Euhemerus, Prodicus, Persaeus, and Alexander the Great, whose works substantiate his argument about the original worship of mortals.

In chapter 22 Octavius continues his attack by requesting attention for the actual rites and mysteries (*sacra ipsa et ipsa mysteria*; 22.1). He mentions the cults of Isis, Ceres, Jupiter, and Cybele and focuses on the elements that are absurd. Then he gives examples of how the form and features of the gods bring contempt upon these supposedly divine beings. He follows with four examples of

¹⁵³ See the charge in Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 8.4.

¹⁵⁴ Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 20.4 (translation Clarke).

¹⁵⁵ Editors have rearranged the original text, because of the repetitious and meandering order. I will follow the unaltered text as Clarke has it. See for other arrangements and the discussion of these options Clarke, *Octavius*, 279-280, there note 289.

the apotheosis of mortals: Erigone, Castor and his brother Pollux, Aesculapius, and Hercules. With these examples Octavius wants to show the bizarre ways in which people were deified.

All these absurdities were learned on the knees of our parents, says Octavius in chapter 23, as a reply to Caecilius' admonition to Christians to stick to what they have learned from their parents.¹⁵⁶ But the stories of Homer and other poets are 'precedents and sanctions for men's vices' (23.7). Plato has therefore properly, in Octavius' eyes, ejected Homer from his ideal city-state (*civitate*; 23.2). Because the stories of Homer and other poets are told to children, boys grow to full manhood with the same beliefs (*isdem opinionibus miseri consenescent, cum sit veritas obvia, sed requirentibus*; 23.8), even though the truth is before their eyes.

Octavius then returns, somewhat unexpectedly, to the statement from chapter 20 and 21 that the gods were originally men. He explains this now with the example of Saturn and Jupiter. Chapter 24 continues this argument and states that what counts for the first of all the gods counts for all that descends from them (24.1). He then deals with the possible escape that men became gods only after death. He argues that the gods were men and did not become gods after their deaths.

The next topic in Octavius' reply to Caecilius' speech is worship of the images of the gods. Octavius argues that by man's will and the act of dedication something becomes a god (24.8). As a reply to an earlier charge (6.1), he states that people live in thoughtless obedience to their parents and this was how the Roman superstition was born (*sic nata Romana superstitio*; 24.10). After discussing the images of the gods he mentions the rites (*ritus*). Several rites are described as ridiculous and when Octavius mentions the supplication with one's wounds, he says: 'would he not be better godless than god-fearing in this fashion?' (*non profanus melius esset quam sic religiosus?*; 24.12). The self-mutilation violates God in Octavius' eyes, because if God wanted eunuchs he could have made them.

Octavius then summarizes the foregoing description of gods that are honored and rites that are performed as superstition (*superstitio*; 25.1). He is here responding to Caecilius' statement that the Roman empire was great because of the gods and the ancestral customs that were held in honor (6.1). What increased and consolidated the Roman empire was not valor but conscientious practice and piety. Octavius states ironically that the illustrious and celebrated Roman justice made its auspicious appearance at the start of the empire (25.1). He then describes this beginning of the empire: the collection of criminals and the terror that let the empire grow. Octavius concludes that the Romans increased not because of religious devotion but rather on account of unpunished sacrilege (*quod religiosi, sed quod inpune sacrilege*; 25.7), and that the gods they have captured are of no value to them. Neither were the chastity of virgins or the religious devotion of their priests the reason why the gods helped the Romans.

Other great empires did not have augurs, he continues, but nevertheless they had long-flourishing empires. This leads Octavius to reject auguries.¹⁵⁷ According to Caecilius, negligence of auspices and augurs would bring disaster. Octavius gives examples of situations in which this was the case, but then continues with examples in which Caecilius' argument does not hold. Caius Caesar, for example, conquered Africa after ignoring the auguries and auspices which opposed his fleet's sailing to Africa before the winter solstice (26.4). After this example, Octavius deals with the oracles. He portrays these as ambiguous and states that the oracles were fabricated. He admits there were auspices and oracles that were true. As an explanation for the falsehood he suggests that unclean

¹⁵⁶ See for the charge *Octavius* 6.1.

¹⁵⁷ A reply to the claim of Caecilius in *Octavius* 7.

spirits (*spiritus sunt insinceri, vagi*; 26.8), which are estranged from God, alienate others from God by the introduction of perverted cults (*et alienati a deo inductis pravis religionibus a deo segregare*; 26.8).¹⁵⁸ With reference to Socrates, Hostanes, and Plato, Octavius explains that these unclean spirits were called *daemones* by the poets, philosophers, and the Magi.¹⁵⁹

After Octavius has argued for the existence of spirits —demons, in the new Christian sense of the term— he asserts that these are hiding beneath consecrated statues and images and gain the authority of deities (27.1). These spirits force man to worship them. So the gods are demons, as they declare themselves whenever they are adjured by Christians. Octavius seems to be a bit inconsistent here in calling the gods demons because he first argued that they were humans (27.6-7). The demons flee from Christian assemblies (*Sic Christianos de proximo fugitant, quos longe in coetibus per vos lacessebant*; 27.7) and according to Octavius they are also the reason why Christians are hated. That people hate the Christians before they have met them is a rejoinder to Caecilius' speech (9.2). According to Octavius, people that investigate the Christians might rather imitate than condemn them.

Thus, first, he has argued that philosophizing is possible for every man. Second, he has undergirded the statement that there exists one god, a unique father of all, the creator of the universe with references to poets and philosophers. And finally, he has attacked the convictions of the ancestors about the gods and has argued that the gods were originally men or demons which are deceiving the ones who honor them. It is now that Octavius will turn in his speech especially to the charges that non-Christians made against the Christians and that were instigated by the demons.

Octavius blames Caecilius and others for passing judgement on the Christians without investigation. At the same time, he admits that he and other Christians thought once what Caecilius and other non-Christians do. First, he refers to the worship of monsters, the devoured infants, and incestuous banquets as a reply to the charges of chapter 9. Second, he argues that if these charges were reasonable, the Christians would have been forced to confess their incest, sacrilege, and immolation of infants instead of their being Christian (28.5). These tales and rumors are, however, the work of demons (*daemones*; 28.6). Octavius deals with these stories and responds to the charges of chapter 9: the worship of the head of an ass and the adoration of the genitals of the priest. In return, Octavius accuses non-Christians of doing such things and refers to Egyptian customs and the people that offer their sex and body to everybody, and this is considered sophisticated (*urbanitas*; 28.10).

In chapter 29 Octavius says that he may not describe these and other abominations any further (29.1). He would not even have believed them to be possible if they were not demonstrated by the behavior of non-Christians. He then turns to the charge from chapter 9.4 about the worship of a criminal and his cross (*Nam quod religioni nostrae hominem noxium et crucem eius adscribitis*; 29.2). He states that Caecilius is far from the truth in suggesting that a criminal or earthly creature could be a god. He then charges the Egyptians with honoring a mortal man, something that is similar to the worship of kings and emperors. Furthermore, Octavius argues that the Romans adore crosses,

¹⁵⁸ Whereas Caecilius called the Christian devotion 'perverted' in *Octavius* 10.1, now Octavius calls the Roman cult a perverted (*pravis*) cult.

¹⁵⁹ *Daemones* formed one class of rational beings among the gods, heroes, and men, see e.g. Plutarch, *Moralia* 5.415B-C. He gives the order of these rational classes and their divine status, see also Wilken, 'The Christians', 113-114. Minucius Felix identifies the *daemones* with evil spirits like Eusebius does when he says that 'our [Christian] divine oracles never call any daemon good', see Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* 4.5 on www.earlychristianwritings.com. In Christian usage *daemones* became clearly negative, whereas this was not (necessarily) the case before Christianity.

and gives some examples of this (29.6-7). He further contends that the sign of the cross is visible in the world of nature. Octavius concludes that 'the sign of the cross is fundamental to the order of nature or that it forms the framework of your own devotion' (*Ita signo crucis aut ratio naturalis innititur aut vestra religio formatur; 29.8*).

The next charge he deals with is that Christian initiations take place by slaughter and with the blood of babies.¹⁶⁰ Octavius argues that one can only believe such things when one is capable of doing them oneself. That non-Christians are capable of this is shown by their practice of abortion and exposure of infants (30.2). According to Octavius, these practices derive from the examples set by non-Christian gods. He gives examples to show that this is the case and then indicates that on the contrary, Christians avoid blood in their meals as well as acts of manslaughter (i.e. gladiatorial games; 30.6).

In chapter 31 Octavius deals with several other accusations. First, he responds to the charge about the incestuous banquets (31.1-5). This is a lie from the demons as well, and not the conclusion of an investigation. Octavius returns the charge against the non-Christians (*de vestris gentibus nata sunt; 31.2*) and gives examples of such behavior in various countries, in literature, and among the gods. He adds an explanation of the Christian way of life to show that in banquets (*convivia; 31.5*) they have regard for modesty and temperance. Second, Octavius responds to the charge of chapter 8.4 about public offices. He argues that refusing public offices does not mean that the Christians' ranks consist of the dregs of the rabble and form a conspiracy (*Nec de ultima statim plebe consistimus, si honores vestros et purpuras recusamus, nec factiosi sumus, si omnes unum bonum sapimus eadem congregati quiete qua singuli; 31.6*). Third, he responds to the Christians' growing numbers and argues that this is evidence of the honorable way of life (*nam in pulcro genere vivendi et perseverat suus et adcrevit alienus; 31.7*).¹⁶¹ Fourth, Octavius deals with the distinction of Christians from non-Christians.¹⁶² He explains that they recognize one another by the signs of sobriety and innocence instead of by marks on their bodies. They also call each other brothers because they have one god, the father of men, are partners in faith, and co-heirs in hope (*sic nos, quod invidetis, fratres vocamus, ut unius dei parentis homines, ut consortes fidei, ut spei coheredes; 31.8*). At the end of the chapter, Octavius retorts that non-Christians only call each other brothers for the purpose of fratricide.

The next chapter introduces another charge and Octavius' response to it.¹⁶³ Octavius argues that Christians do not have temples or altars because man himself can be considered as the image of god, the universe cannot contain God (let alone a temple), and worship with the heart is the best thing humans can do. He then argues that Christians can perceive god, though they cannot see him, and that this is the ground for their belief (*ex hoc deum credimus; 32.4*). He substantiates this with examples from nature, like the sun that cannot be seen, and refers to the soul of man that we cannot see either but is still supposed to exist.

Octavius next rejects Caecilius' claim from chapter 10.5 and argues that God is present everywhere, even in man, and knows human secrets and thoughts. He uses as an analogy the sun, which is present everywhere. He concludes that as humans we all live in the sight of god. And although we think we are many, to God we are very few: 'We distinguish nations and tribes: to God the whole world is a single household.' (*Nos gentes nationesque distinguimus: deo una domus est*

¹⁶⁰ See the charge in *Octavius* 9.5.

¹⁶¹ See *Octavius* 9.1.

¹⁶² A response to *Octavius* 9.2.

¹⁶³ See for the charge *Octavius* 10.2.

mundus hic totus; 33.1). And whereas kings need to be informed by servants, God has no need of informants.

Octavius then explains that the Judaeans were handed over *by* their god, instead of *with* their god. This is a response to the charge of Caecilius in chapter 10.4. Octavius argues that the Judaeans once worshipped the Christian god and were prosperous, but that their own wickedness brought destruction (33.4). This is substantiated by several authors mentioned by Octavius. This approach to the theme of conquered nations is different from the one he employed in 25 where it is the sacrilegious way of life and the misdeeds of the Romans that advanced Rome's empire at the expense of others.

Still another charge Octavius deals with concerns the coming conflagration of the world (34.1).¹⁶⁴ He states that to refuse to believe this is a common error among the masses. The philosophers, however, believed that what has a beginning also has an end. Octavius cites Stoics, Epicureans, and Plato. These references show that the philosophers discuss the same ideas the Christians have. The reason for this is, according to Octavius, that the philosophers have followed in a shadowy way the prophets, and not vice versa (34.5). This is also true with regard to the rebirth of men. Here references are made to Pythagoras and Plato, with the side note that they have corrupted the transmission (34.6). Octavius then continues with the question about the resurrection of the body and the reshaping of it by God. He argues that nature shows that there is a resurrection and we only have to wait for it to happen. That people wish that there is only annihilation after death is an error by which they are led astray.

Octavius continues with the everlasting torments and call upon the poets that inspired by demons and the oracles of the prophets warned for it in their verses. According to Octavius, the fire of wisdom will scorch and remake men's limbs (35.3). It is like a thunderbolt that leaves men unconsumed and like the fires from the Aetna and Vesuvius that do not exhaust themselves (35.3). In Octavius' eyes, people are rightly tortured when they do not know god. In addition to this Christians are superior to non-Christians even if they do not measure up to the full standard of their own teaching (35.5). In prison, many non-Christians could be found and the reason why Christians are in prison is their religious devotion, or because they have deserted it (*Christianus ibi nullus nisi aut reus suae religionis aut profugus*; 35.6).

In chapter 36 Octavius denies that Christians believe in fate and are therefore not free.¹⁶⁵ According to him fate (*fatum*) is what God has 'fated' (*fatus*=spoken) about the Christians (36.2). And because of God's omniscience, God gives them what they need. This is enough to answer to Caecilius' charge, and Octavius says that he will deal with it more broadly on another occasion. After this Octavius responds to the charge of poverty.¹⁶⁶ For Christians, poverty is a great credit, because the one who possesses things and still wants more is truly poor, and one cannot be poorer than at birth. When Octavius has rejected the charge, he continues with an explanation of the experience and suffering of the defects of the body.¹⁶⁷ According to him, these struggles are part of the Christians' training as soldiers (*non est poena, militia est*; 36.8). All infirmities are the test of Christians.

In chapter 37 Octavius turns to the Christian who is confronted with suffering and tortures. He again compares Christians with soldiers (*milites*), with God as their general (*imperator*; 37.2-3).

¹⁶⁴ See the charge in Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 11.1.

¹⁶⁵ See for Caecilius' statement *Ibidem*, 11.5.

¹⁶⁶ A reply to *Ibidem*, 12.2.

¹⁶⁷ *Idem*.

However, what the general cannot give, namely life, God can and does give to the Christians. A Christian is not destroyed by death and therefore he may seem wretched, but is not. Examples of other heroes are mentioned to explain that no one is willing to undergo punishment without good reason, or can undergo it without God (37.6). Then, Octavius deals with the question why people are ignorant of God and enjoy wealth, honor, and power. He argues that even a king feels fear. In his argument he gives a reply to the Christian rejection of public offices (8.4) and calls public service a worthless cult (*inanis cultus dignitatis*; 37.10). His point is that only virtues are important in life. Christians are known by their morals (*mores*) and modesty (37.11). And this is why they do not join in spectacles, chariot races, theater and the like.¹⁶⁸

At the end of his speech, Octavius replies to Caecilius' case by explaining Christian refusal of food and drink from sacrifices. Christians abstain from them to show that they do not submit to demons and are not ashamed of their devotion (*aut nos nostrae religionis pudere* 38.1).¹⁶⁹ On the point of flowers, he replies that they delight in the spring flowers but do not decorate their hair or their dead with them.¹⁷⁰ He retorts that non-Christians apply torches and garlands to the deceased, but that blessed people do not need these and wretched persons do not deserve them (38.3). The Christians wait instead for the eternal coronation. Furthermore, Octavius states that there is happiness in the future and in the present life in which they meditate on that future (38.4). Then he parallels Caecilius' conclusion.¹⁷¹ Socrates is mentioned, but here as the 'buffoon of Athens', followed by Academic philosophers. Then Octavius turns to all philosophers and accuses them of vices. As the answer to what the philosophers failed to find, Octavius brings to the fore Christianity. Finally, he prays that superstition may be curbed and true devotion may be preserved (*cohibeatur superstitio, impietas expietur, vera religio reservetur*; 38.7).

4.3 Octavius' Case Contextualized

Just as with Caecilius, we can contextualize the arguments of Octavius' reply with other writings from the ancient world. Here again, we see that Minucius Felix uses authors such as Cicero, Seneca, Plato, and Tertullian.¹⁷² This is made explicit in chapter 39, where Minucius Felix mentions that Octavius has parried his critics with their own weapons, the arms of the philosophers. Octavius himself refers to Plato on several occasions.¹⁷³ Other references to philosophers often, as we will see, relate to part of Cicero's work. Octavius thus enters clearly into alliance with philosophy. In this he differs from the majority of Latin apologists, as Jacobsen portrays them.¹⁷⁴ According to Jacobsen, Latin apologists emphasized the differences from philosophy, whereas Greek apologists did pursue alliances.¹⁷⁵ Tertullian, however, who is reckoned to be part of the majority of the Latin apologists, was

¹⁶⁸ See the charge in Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 12.5.

¹⁶⁹ See *ibidem* 12.5.

¹⁷⁰ A reply to the charge in *Ibidem*, 12.6.

¹⁷¹ Compare *Ibidem*, 13.

¹⁷² See also Becker, *Der 'Octavius'*, 74.

¹⁷³ Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 19.14, 23.3, 26.12, 27.1, 34.4, 34.6. Reference is made to Plato's *Timaeus* and *Republic*.

¹⁷⁴ Jacobsen, 'Main Topics', 103.

¹⁷⁵ *Idem*.

apparently used by Minucius Felix. One may ask therefore whether a sharp distinction can be made between constructing alliances and emphasizing differences, as Jacobsen does.¹⁷⁶

When we turn to the way in which Octavius responds to Caecilius' case, we see that it is similar to how Josephus starts his second book of *Against Apion*, where he says: 'His argument is difficult to summarize and his meaning to grasp. But, so far as the extreme disorder and confusion of his lying statements admit of analysis, one may say that some fall into the same category as those already investigated'.¹⁷⁷ Both discredit their opponent before they respond to their arguments. Octavius focuses on the inconsistencies in Caecilius' argumentation, whereas Josephus focuses on the confusion of Apion's case and the meaning that is not straightforward.

When Octavius argues that Christians are entitled to debate about the heavens, he leans on the Stoic principle that the capacity of reason is given by nature and not acquired by money.¹⁷⁸ Furthermore, he refers to a general philosophical principle that the truth of an argument is more important than the status of the one who gives the argument.¹⁷⁹ Octavius also uses the argument from design that was well known in the Stoic school. In the second book of Cicero's *De natura deorum*, the Stoic Balbus sets out this argument at length.¹⁸⁰ He argues that there is an element that 'holds the whole world together and preserves it, and this [is] an element possessed of sensation and reason'.¹⁸¹ This is called 'nature' and means that the world is sustained and governed by order and a certain semblance of design.¹⁸² Like Octavius, Balbus makes reference to the stars, the celestial adornment, and man's understanding of it.¹⁸³ This argument, however, is not visible exclusively in the Stoic school, but is also visible in Wisdom 13.1-5 and Psalms 19.2 and was used by other apologists.¹⁸⁴

The way the providence of God is exemplified in 18.3 is most likely taken from Cicero's *De natura deorum*. There Balbus explains that the providence of nature, the governing principle, is illustrated by Egypt, which is watered by the Nile, by Mesopotamia, which is watered by the Euphrates, and by the sowing of the Indus river.¹⁸⁵ Exactly these examples are also used by Octavius to argue the same point.

That there is one god Octavius argues with reference to earthly empires and nature. This way of reasoning was common in the ancient world, though it was not unchallenged.¹⁸⁶ Porphyry, for example, attacked the analogy and said that a monarch ruled over others like himself and so God had to rule over other gods to be truly a monarch.¹⁸⁷ Octavius sticks to the analogy, however, and concludes that there is one god. He gives his attributes in a negative form: what God is not. Tertullian does the same, mentioning the same attributes and forms, and he is most likely Minucius Felix'

¹⁷⁶ Ibidem, 102-103.

¹⁷⁷ Josephus, *Against Apion* 2.6. There are no indications that Minucius Felix actually knew the works of Josephus. The similarities with Josephus show that they used the same kind of rhetoric and sources.

¹⁷⁸ See Seneca, *Epistles* 44.3, 90.1. The first reference mentions the philosophers too as an example as Octavius does in *Octavius* 16.5.

¹⁷⁹ See e.g. Cicero, *De natura deorum* 1.10 and Plato, *Charmides* 161C.

¹⁸⁰ Cicero, *de natura deorum* 2.

¹⁸¹ Ibidem, 2.29.

¹⁸² Ibidem, 2.82.

¹⁸³ Ibidem, 2.115.

¹⁸⁴ Aristides, *Apology* 1, see www.earlychristianwritings.com; Tertullian, *Apology* 17.

¹⁸⁵ Cicero, *de natura deorum* 2.130.

¹⁸⁶ For the use of this analogy see Origen, *Contra Celsus* 4.81, 8.63, and Seneca, *De clementia* 1.19.2 about nature that conceived the idea of a king.

¹⁸⁷ See reference in Clarke, *Octavius*, 258.

source here.¹⁸⁸ That people agreed upon the godhead, although they used different names, was a common notion in the ancient world.¹⁸⁹ It was, however, challenged by the Christian author Origen.¹⁹⁰ According to him, the correctness of certain names was proved by spells and exorcisms. When one used the wrong name to drive out a certain spirit it became inefficacious. This shows that names could not simply be exchanged with each other and that they do not point to the same spirit or god.

Octavius further argues for the recognition of one god with reference to the poets Homer and Vergil.¹⁹¹ Octavius uses them as a proof for his argument, but in chapter 23 he will reject the witness of poets for the truth. Appeals to poets were made by Christian authors, as we can already see in *Acts* 17.28 where the apostle Paul says: 'As some of your own poets have said ...'.¹⁹² That the poets contradicted each other and did not speak the truth every time is exploited in some length by Theophilus.¹⁹³

The philosophers used to undergird the same argument come from the speech of Velleius in Cicero's *de natura deorum* 1.25ff. Minucius Felix uses these words for a different purpose. Whereas Velleius refutes the theology of different schools, Minucius Felix establishes the philosophical belief in monotheism. This also explains why some philosophers are left out (e.g. Anaximander, Alcmaeon, Parmenides). At the end of chapter 19, Octavius adds Plato as the last example and refers to his *Timaeus* where he says: 'And that which has come into existence must necessarily, as we say, have come into existence by reason of some Cause. Now to discover the Maker and Father of this Universe were a task indeed; and having discovered Him, to declare Him unto all men were a thing impossible'.¹⁹⁴ The reference to philosophers is also visible in Tertullian's *Apology*, where he states that the philosophers reflect the truth of the Christian doctrine.¹⁹⁵ Although the philosophers stated some truths, their claims were also self-contradictory, according to the Christian Theophilus.¹⁹⁶ Octavius, however, does not deal with this problem and mentions only philosophers useful for his argument. In this way Octavius can ask the question whether present-day Christians are philosophers or that philosophers from the past were already Christians. The correspondence between philosophers and Christians gave rise to these suggestions in other literature as well.¹⁹⁷

The attack on ancient tradition with its belief in mythical creatures that follows (20.3-4) is similar to Tertullian's attack in the *Apology*.¹⁹⁸ And the examples mentioned by Octavius are mentioned in *De natura deorum* as an example of things that are not believed anymore.¹⁹⁹ When Octavius argues that the gods of the ancient tradition were once merely men and later deified, he utters an opinion that is also articulated in Cicero's *De natura deorum* and can also be found in

¹⁸⁸ Tertullian, *Apology* 17.2.

¹⁸⁹ Celsus according to Origen, see *Contra Celsus* 1.24, 5.45; Diogenes Laertius 7.135; Dio Chrysostom 31.11; Maximus in Augustine, *Letters* 16.1.

¹⁹⁰ Origen, *Contra Celsus* 1.24-25, 5.45.

¹⁹¹ Reference to Homer, *Illias* 1.544 and Vergil, *Aeneis* 6.724ff.

¹⁹² *Acts* 17.28.

¹⁹³ Theophilus of Antioch, *Ad Autolycus* 2.8, see www.earlychristianwritings.com.

¹⁹⁴ Plato, *Timaeus* 28C.

¹⁹⁵ Tertullian, *Apology* 37.

¹⁹⁶ Theophilus, *Ad Autolycus* 2.4.

¹⁹⁷ Justin, *Apology* 2.13; Theophilus, *Ad Autolycus* 1.14. The latter argues that philosophers have stolen their words from the holy scriptures.

¹⁹⁸ Tertullian, *Apology* 16.13.

¹⁹⁹ Cicero, *De natura deorum* 2.5.

Tertullian's *Apology*.²⁰⁰ How this deification took place is exemplified in four examples at the end of chapter 22. But first he deals with the absurdity of several cults. Other apologists, such as Origen, Tertullian, and Arnobius, also mentioned absurdities of the cults of non-Christians.²⁰¹ And that Plato properly ejected the famous Homer from his ideal city-state, because he did harm to the truth with his fables, is a point used not only by Christians but also by the Judaeen Josephus as an argument to show the absurdity of the stories about the gods.²⁰² The perverse effects of these stories is called to mind both by Christian and non-Christian authors.²⁰³

The argument of Octavius that the images of the gods are no gods is shared by the non-Christian Celsus, according to Origen. Celsus quoted Heraclitus to show that the Christians were not the first that say that images made by man are no gods.²⁰⁴ And Origen calls it a general idea that is implanted by birth.²⁰⁵ That the images become gods is according to Tertullian and Arnobius a (deceiving) human act.²⁰⁶ Like Octavius, Tertullian argues that the impotence of the gods is shown by the gnawing of the images by animals.²⁰⁷

That Octavius calls the Roman and other forms of devotion perverted (*pravis*; 26.8) makes Romans comparable to the Bacchants, whose cult was labelled perverted as well.²⁰⁸ But the primary point here is to turn the charge of being perverted against the non-Christian forms of devotion. This is a common rhetorical strategy among the apologists.²⁰⁹ The perverted forms of devotion of the non-Christians are according to Octavius the work of spirits. We see this same argument in Tertullian.²¹⁰ In the *Octavius* this line of argument is a bit strange because Octavius has explained that the gods are human. We would, therefore, expect an explanation that the perverted forms of devotion were the work of men too. It is likely that Octavius has taken over Tertullian's argument without reworking it for a consistent argumentation, although we would expect that.

When Octavius states in chapter 28 that people have not investigated the Christians, he agrees with Tertullian, who states that he will tell the truth in silent literature 'if you are not allowed openly to investigate, face to face to examine, the Christian issue, to learn what it is in truth'.²¹¹ That the Christian issue was not investigated and that the name Christian was enough to be persecuted is probably shown in the epistle of Pliny to the emperor Trajan and clearly visible in Justin and Tertullian.²¹² But the charges made by Caecilius could also show an intentional misunderstanding of the Christian rituals.²¹³ This would make sense in this dialogue, because Caecilius is strongly opposing Octavius and the other Christians.

²⁰⁰ Ibidem, 2.60, 3.53-54; Tertullian, *Apology* 11.

²⁰¹ Origen, *Contra Celsus* 3.43; Tertullian, *Apology* 9.4; Arnobius, *Adversus Gentes* 1.34 on Jupiter. Arnobius, *Adversus Gentes* 5.5ff; Tertullian, *Apology* 15.2,5, 25.4ff on Cybele.

²⁰² Origen, *Contra Celsus* 4.36; Tertullian, *Ad Nationes* 2.7.11; Josephus, *Contra Apion* 2.256.

²⁰³ Justin, *Apology* 1.21; Cicero, *De natura deorum* 1.42; Plato, *Republic* 2.378B, 3.391E. The structure of the argument is similar to Tertullian, *Apology* 14.2ff, supplemented with *Apology* 11.6.

²⁰⁴ Origen, *Contra Celsus* 1.5.

²⁰⁵ Ibidem, 3.40, see also 3.76 and 7.62f on this theme.

²⁰⁶ Tertullian, *Apology* 5.1; Arnobius, *Ad gentes* 6.15f.

²⁰⁷ Tertullian, *Apology* 12.7.

²⁰⁸ See chapter 3.3 above.

²⁰⁹ Jacobsen, 'Main topics', 101, 105-106.

²¹⁰ See Tertullian, *Apology* 23.4ff.

²¹¹ Ibidem, 1.1-2.

²¹² Pliny, *Epistles* 10.96; Justin, *Apology* 1.4; Tertullian, *Apology* 2.18ff.

²¹³ Jacobsen, 'Main topics', 101.

However that may be, Octavius shows the truth and refutes the charges made by Caecilius. He argues that non-Christians committed infanticide and condemns that they expose their children and practice abortion. These practices were widely condemned by Judaeans and Christian authors.²¹⁴ Tacitus finds it noteworthy that Judaeans and Germans raise their offspring.²¹⁵ Not to expose or abort was a reason for praise in the literary tradition.²¹⁶ Octavius' speech follows here the line of argument that we can find in Tertullian and like him, he deals with the incestuous banquets after the charge of infanticide. Again, both give the example of Persia, which was a common one, to show that the slander of incest could be traced back to non-Christians.²¹⁷ Other examples from Tertullian are not mentioned explicitly but with the general terms of 'literature' and 'gods'.

That Christians called one another brothers, because they had one and the same God as father, is similar to the Stoic idea that we find in Seneca.²¹⁸ Seneca writes:

I can lay down for mankind a rule, in short compass, for our duties in human relationships: all that you behold, that which comprises both god and man, is one—we are the parts of one great body. Nature produced us related to one another, since she created us from the same source and to the same end. She engendered in us mutual affection, and made us prone to friendships. She established fairness and justice; according to her ruling, it is more wretched to commit than to suffer injury. Through her orders, let our hands be ready for all that needs to be helped.²¹⁹

It is nature that relates every human being (and god) with one another, because it created everything from the same source. In a similar way, Octavius has argued that the Christian god created everything (chapters 17-19).

Some other philosophical notions can be detected in chapter 32. First of all, Octavius refers to man as the image of god. This can be traced back to *Genesis* 1.26-27 and *Colossians* 3.10, but is also in agreement with Plato and Cicero.²²⁰ That God cannot be seen and the example of the sun that cannot be seen is also known from Plato.²²¹ The analogy of the sun for god, who knows our secrets and thoughts, is known from Seneca in this case.²²² And the last part of the argument, which we can find in chapter 33, likewise corresponds in part with passages from Seneca.²²³

In chapter 34, Octavius refers explicitly to philosophers. He mentions the Stoics and that they never wavered in their view. Philo and Cicero, however, show that there were Stoics that doubted the doctrine or left it behind.²²⁴ Thus, Octavius is a bit inaccurate here, but not alone in

²¹⁴ Josephus, *Contra Apion* 2.202; Philo, *De specialibus legibus* 3.108ff; Justin, *Apology* 1.27; Origen, *Contra Celsus* 8.55; Tertullian, *Apology* 9.7ff.

²¹⁵ Tacitus, *Histories* 5.5.

²¹⁶ See Tacitus, *Histories* 5.5, *Germania* 19.

²¹⁷ Origen, *Contra Celsus* 5.27; Herodotus, *The Persian War* 3.31 mentions the Persian Cambyses marrying his sister; Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos* 28, see www.earlychristianwritings.com.

²¹⁸ The resemblance to Seneca is even more striking in Tertullian, see Tertullian, *Apology* 39.7ff.

²¹⁹ Seneca, *Epistles* 95.52.

²²⁰ Plato, *Republic* 6.501B-C; Cicero, *De natura deorum* 1.90,101. See on this theme also Origen, *Contra Celsus* 4.30.

²²¹ Plato, *Phaedo* 99Df, *Republic* 508Bff.

²²² Seneca, *Epistles* 41.5, see also *Acts* 1.24; Origen, *Contra Celsus* 7.51; Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.4.14.

²²³ Seneca, *De Beneficiis* 7.1.7, *Epistles* 95.47.

²²⁴ Philo, *De aeterna mundi* 76; Cicero, *De natura deorum* 2.118.

this.²²⁵ The reference to Plato seems a bit inaccurate too, because Plato talks about fire, water, and other means by which the earth is destroyed and not only of water and fire.²²⁶ These philosophers were, however, corrupting the truths from the prophets, according to the Christian spokesman. Here Octavius finds himself in good company with other Judaeans and Christian apologists, who used the same argument.²²⁷ That this was the other way around (Judaeans and Christians were derivative) is claimed by Celsus, according to Origen.²²⁸ The inaccurate representations of the Stoics and Plato's view are very likely intentional, because in this way Octavius' argument is stronger than if he had given the accurate one. Octavius includes only what is useful and leaves out the rest. It was possible that readers would not see the inaccuracies and would be convinced by the argument.

In Octavius' argument in chapter 36 we can also recognize some rhetorical and philosophical elements. First of all, Octavius states that he will deal with the subject of fate somewhere else. This is exactly what Cicero does with the same subject in *De divinatione*.²²⁹ This could be a rhetorical trick, but it could be that he wrote on the subject elsewhere.²³⁰ That God has determined the decrees of fate to suit our deserts and traits is in line with Seneca, who said that God determined the decrees of fate and obeyed them too.²³¹ The following arguments are in line with the same work as well: that infirmities are a test, like gold is tested in the fire,²³² and that no one will be poorer than when one was born.²³³ The argument that suffering is not a punishment, but a training, is also explored by Seneca in this work and in his epistle to Lucilius.²³⁴

In the conclusion of his speech, Octavius calls Socrates the buffoon of Athens. This recalls Zeno calling Socrates the Attic equivalent of the Roman buffoons.²³⁵ Octavius continues by charging the philosophers with vices. That he could give examples is substantiated by an epistle of Seneca to Marcellinus and Tertullian's argument in the *Apology*.²³⁶

4.4 The Social Category of Christianity in Octavius' Speech

When we look at the argumentation and the contextualization of Octavius' speech it is hard to extract from it a clear social category that suited the Christians according to Octavius. Part of the problem is that Octavius replies to Caecilius' case and is building his own case in response to the non-Christian one. Charges that were made against the Christians, in which social categories could be

²²⁵ See Origen, *Contra Celsus* 6.71, he does however not (fully) agree with their doctrine. Justin does not agree either with the view of the Stoics, see *Apology* 1.20. Arnobius, *Ad nationes* 2.9 refers to Panaetius without mentioning that he changed his mind.

²²⁶ Plato, *Timaeus* 22Cff. See also Arnobius' reference to Plato, *Ad nationes* 1.8.

²²⁷ See e.g. Josephus, *Contra Apionem* 2.168, 281; Tertullian, *Apology* 46.18ff; Justin, *Apology* 1.44.

²²⁸ Origen, *Contra Celsus* 4.11, 7.32.

²²⁹ Cicero, *De divinatione* 2.19.

²³⁰ Tertullian for example refers to another work by him in *De anima* 20.5.

²³¹ Seneca, *De Providentia* 5.9.

²³² Seneca, *De Providentia* 5.10. It is also common in biblical and patristic literature, see e.g. *1 Peter* 1.7; Origen, *Contra Celsus* 6.44 and other references in Clarke, *Octavius*, 364 there note 618 and 619.

²³³ Seneca, *De Providentia* 6.6.

²³⁴ *Ibidem*, 4.4; Seneca, *Epistles* 96.5. This military analogy was favored in Christian writings. See the classical study of Adolf Harnack, *Militia Christi: Die christliche Religion unter der Soldatenstand in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten* (Tübingen, 1905).

²³⁵ Cicero, *de natura deorum* 1.93.

²³⁶ Seneca, *Epistles* 29.5; Tertullian, *Apology* 46.10ff.

found, are rejected and used against the non-Christians.²³⁷ A clear example of this is that the Roman cult is now called perverted (*prava*) instead of the Christian devotion (*religio*).²³⁸ In this way not the Christian devotion but the Roman cult becomes more comparable to the Bacchants whose cult was also called a perverted cult. Of course, the identity of the Christians is in some way revealed in the refutation to the charges that were made. It is in the *Octavius*, however, more in a reverse way. Therefore, we have to build our case on the arguments that Octavius uses.

Octavius confirms several claims that Caecilius made in his speech. Christians indeed avoid spectacles and public banquets, and do not use flowers in funeral rites. He confirms in this way that they have left behind their ancestral customs. But Octavius also uses the language of the social category *gens* in his argumentation. In chapter 17 he uses the duties of a citizen (*civilis*) with his city-state (*civitas*) as an analogy for the duties of a man in the world. In chapter 32 he refers to the sacrifices (*sacrificia*) and hallowed rites (*dei sacra*) of Christians. He argues that the one who practices justice offers libations (32.3). And no image of God is made, because God is invisible. This is a rather philosophical way of speaking about worshipping god, as we have seen in the contextualization of Octavius' speech.

It is this philosophical thinking that forms the greater part of Octavius' speech. The way Christians worship their god, what they believe about God, and the rejection of the ancestral tradition is substantiated with philosophical argument. Cicero is used extensively and several times references are made to Plato. Octavius also uses Seneca to undergird his argument. These explicit and implicit references to philosophers and the philosophical way of dealing with the true worship of god (*religio*) make it likely that Octavius thought about Christianity as at least comparable to philosophical schools in important respects. This seems to be substantiated by Octavius' conclusion in chapter 20, where he leaves it up to Caecilius to conclude whether present-day Christians are philosophers or philosophers from the past were already Christians. Together with his claim that philosophers have imitated and corrupted the truths from the prophets, this would lead to the conclusion that Christians are philosophers. The philosophical school would be different from the Stoic school, however, although Octavius used Stoic notions in his speech to undergird his argument. It would be different from the Platonic school too, although references are made to Plato several times. At the end of his speech Octavius clearly marks off the Christians from (other) philosophers (38.5). The Christians do not stop with skepticism but have found what the philosophers failed to find.

There are also traces of the category of the household in Octavius' speech. He uses the related terms, however, not to describe Christianity but as an analogy for how God and the world are connected. The world is compared to a house (*domus*) and because it is orderly and well-kept a master (*dominus*), who is in charge of it, must be expected.²³⁹ The same is true for the world that needs a master of the universe. On another occasion Octavius argues that God sees the entire universe (*mundus totus*) as a single household (*una domus*) whereas men draw distinctions between nations (*gentes*) and peoples (*nationes*).²⁴⁰ Here the social category of the household meets the category of *gens*. Octavius proposes here a view in which nations are part of the same structure in which there is ultimately one god and distinctions between nations do not matter. And because Christians have one and the same god as father, because they are partners in faith, and co-heirs in

²³⁷ See for the social categories in the charges chapter 3.4 above.

²³⁸ See also note 158 above.

²³⁹ Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 18.4.

²⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, 33.1. See Tertullian, *De pudicitia* 7.11, see www.earlychristianwritings.com.

hope, they call each other brothers (*fratres*).²⁴¹ This fits with the household category too, although we have already seen that the term could be used more broadly.²⁴²

What Octavius does say about the Christians is that they come together in assemblies (*coetibus*).²⁴³ This is a term that can evoke the social category of associations. But the term is a general one that can simply designate any assembly, and therefore cannot be linked to a specific social category, although it was also used for associations.²⁴⁴ Another element concerns the banquets (*convivia*) that were organized by associations. But these are neither restricted to the associations and are only once explicitly mentioned by Octavius.²⁴⁵ Thus, these reference does not give a clear indication that Octavius sees the Christian group as an association.

Whereas Caecilius called the Christians a superstition in his speech, Octavius calls the Roman cult a superstition and his own devotion *religio*.²⁴⁶ As we have seen before, the term *superstitio* could not be connected with a specific social category.²⁴⁷ The same seems to be true for the term *religio*.²⁴⁸ In general, it refers to the normative opinion of approval of the beliefs and practices of people, although the sarcastic use of *religio* means the opposite. Whereas Caecilius claims that the Roman cult is *religio* Octavius claims that it is *superstitio*. Both state arguments to substantiate that claim in their speech. But in the end they have a different opinion. In this way the conclusion of Octavius' speech is exactly the opposite of Caecilius' one.

4.5 Summary

In sum we can say that Octavius refutes most of the charges that Caecilius uttered against the Christians. In this way he defends the Christians and removes the slander. At the same time, he retorts the charges and blames the non-Christians for their ancestral customs of impious deeds. Thus, Octavius promotes Christianity as the true devotion (*religio*) and characterizes the ancestral customs of Rome (and others) as superstition. We have seen that Octavius uses philosophical opinions and theories to substantiate his case and parallels the argumentation of other Christians, like Tertullian. The social category that fits best to Octavius description is that of the philosophical school. Several statements point in this direction. In describing Christianity as a philosophical school, Octavius (and Minucius Felix) does not stand alone. A long tradition, possibly originating with the hypothetical source Q, Luke-Acts, and the New Testament letter of James, which becomes explicit in Justin, saw Christianity as a philosophy and the Christian teacher as a philosopher.²⁴⁹

²⁴¹ Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 31.8.

²⁴² See chapter 3.3 above.

²⁴³ Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 27.6

²⁴⁴ Waltzing, *Étude historique*, 108, 153, and 169.

²⁴⁵ Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 31.5.

²⁴⁶ *Superstitio* is used in *ibidem*, 24.10, 25.1, 25.8, 33.2, and 38.7.

²⁴⁷ See chapter 3.4 above.

²⁴⁸ But see Wilken, 'The Christians', 107. He argues that *religio* and philosophy were connected and quotes Seneca as proof.

²⁴⁹ Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 8.

CHAPTER 5 – CONCLUSIONS: CHRISTIANITY THROUGH THE EYES OF NON-CHRISTIANS AND CHRISTIANS

What can we say about the differences between the description of early Christianity by non-Christians and Christians? Which social categories were used by both groups to describe the Christians? These questions guided the investigation of this present study. At the end of this study it is time to answer those questions and to draw some conclusions.

Before I do that, it is important to repeat that ‘early Christianity’ is a problematic term.²⁵⁰ There was not one uniform group of people that we can call Christianity. Several disparate groups identified themselves with some sort of allegiance to Christ, but these groups did not always accept each other as fellow followers of Christ. Consequently, the conclusions of this investigation are not general statements about all groups that identified themselves as Christians. Paying attention to the relationship of other Christian groups with the one that is described in the *Octavius* would require using a different approach, and therefore the study of these ties have been left out of this investigation.. My focus was on the relationship of the Christian self-description with the non-Christian description of Christians in the *Octavius* and in using the general term ‘Christian’ I stayed close to this text. Nonetheless we must keep in mind that not everyone that called oneself ‘Christian’ would have identified themselves with the description given in Octavius’ speech.

In chapter 3 we saw how the non-Christian Caecilius promoted the ancestral customs, especially those of Rome, and accused the Christians of abandoning them. In addition, he argued that Christianity, as he knew it, was a superstition. While expounding his views, Caecilius tried to convince Octavius to return to his ancestral customs. He gave several examples of practices that according to him proved the superstitious way of life of Christians. We can assume that Caecilius’ description is a representative view of Christianity by some outsiders, because of the apologetic purpose of the *Octavius* is apologetic and, on top of that, many charges are known from other ancient authors. From the outsider’s point of view the Christians form a cult association, like the Bacchants, which was secluded from society and had obscure practices and rituals.

The next chapter discussed Octavius’ reply to the charges uttered by Caecilius. Octavius rejected the charges and returned them to non-Christians in an attempt to remove the slander from the Christians. At the same time he tried to convince Caecilius to become a Christian because Christianity was the true *religio*. The epilogue tells us that Octavius succeeded.²⁵¹ In his refutation Octavius many times referred to philosophers such as Plato and Socrates, and put Christianity, as he practiced it, on a par with philosophical schools. The Christians formed, he appears to suggest, a philosophical school with even more knowledge than other schools.

From the *Octavius* we may conclude that the description of Christianity by insiders and outsiders differed in several ways. First, Christians denied that certain practices were part of Christianity, even when outsiders believed that was most certainly the case. Examples of such practices include the killing of an innocent baby during the initiation rite, incestuous practices in gatherings, and the worship of a criminal, the head of an ass, and the genitals of a priest. At the same time, Christians admitted to some charges of outsiders but gave them a positive interpretation. They acknowledged, for example, the observation that the number of Christians was growing, the absence

²⁵⁰ See note 9 above.

²⁵¹ Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 39-40.

of temples and altars for their worship, the absence of Christians at spectacles, the refraining from public offices, and the fact that they had left behind their ancestral customs. Within the *Octavius*, the negative interpretations are used to accuse the non-Christians in return.

Second, the Christians and non-Christians described Christians as a different kind of social group. The non-Christians portrayed them as an association with superstitious beliefs and practices. The Christians, however, identified themselves with the philosophers and described themselves as the philosophical school with the only true *religio*. Whereas cult associations could be devalued in the eyes of non-Christians, the philosophical schools were highly valued. Although these two categories are close to each other, as we have seen in chapter 1, the purpose of gathering was clearly different. The outsider's and insider's perspective differed significantly and clearly formed a contrast between what should be seen as a *religio* and a superstition.

What do these results mean for the study of early Christianity and the formation of their (social) identity? In recent years, several scholars have tried to identify ethnic reasoning in early Christian groups. This present study confirms that there were ethnic terms used by Christians and non-Christians in the presentation of the Christian identity. However, these terms were used to show that the Christians left behind their ancestral customs and were distinguishing themselves from their *gens*. When the Christians are compared to the Judaeen *gens*, it is only because they worship one god, and not because they were to be identified as a *gens* as well. This supports the conclusion of Mason and Esler in their response to Horrell. According to them, Christian groups were seen as voluntary associations that used *topoi* from the Judaeen *gens* but clearly were no *gens*.²⁵² Their conclusion is also based on philological, historical, and social-scientific observations. This study confirms this picture as the outsider's perspective. The insider's perspective points toward a philosophical school.

Yet the results of this study question conclusions about ethnicisation, such as made by Horrell.²⁵³ He problematizes the categorization of association, philosophical school, 'people', and so on because, according to him, one runs the risk of squeezing the evidence in a single mold.²⁵⁴ Nevertheless, while there is some overlap between the categories, there is a clear distinction between the categories of association and *gens*. We have to keep in mind that the Christians had to create a place in society where several social groups could be distinguished. In their self-description and their identity-forming they could only make use of terms that were used for those other groups. This study thus has shown that Christians used ethnic terms to oppose themselves to *gentes* without identifying themselves as a new *gens*, and the same goes for other social categories. Therefore, we should be careful in concluding that based on the shared terminology the Christians saw themselves (and were seen by outsiders) as a specific social group.²⁵⁵

Finally, this study has given insight into the understudied *Octavius* of Marcus Minucius Felix. We have seen how the author dealt with the charges of outsiders and their picture of Christianity. In his reply to those charges he offered his own view on the identity of the Christians, clearly giving

²⁵² Mason and Esler, 'Judaeen and Christ-Follower Identities', 515.

²⁵³ David G. Horrell, 'Ethnicisation, Marriage and Early Christian Identity: Critical Reflections on 1 Corinthians 7, 1 Peter 3 and Modern New Testament Scholarship' *New Testament Studies* 62.3 (July 2016), 439–60.

²⁵⁴ David G. Horrell, 'Judaeen Ethnicity and Christ-Following Voluntarism? A Reply to Steve Mason and Philip Esler' *New Testament Studies* 65.1 (2019), 1–20, there 7.

²⁵⁵ It is not entirely clear to me how we can distinguish between the identity of the Christians as 'an ethnic group' and as 'a form of ethnicisation': 'the making of a people', see Horrell, 'Ethnicisation', 458. It is possible that Horrell's disapproval of social categorization forms the basis of this distinction.

Christianity a place within society. In the end not Caecilius' words became reality but Octavius' wish that Christianity would be preserved.

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