

## M. Minucius Felix as a Christian Humanist

MICHAEL VON ALBRECHT

## I. Life, Work and Chronology

M. Minucius Felix, a lawyer in Rome, was born perhaps in North Africa, a region Juvenal calls the "nurse of barristers" (7. 148). Indeed the names Minucius gives to the interlocutors of his dialogue *Octavius*<sup>1</sup> are attested epigraphically in North Africa; moreover, Caecilius, the defender of paganism, mentions Fronto, who attacked the Christians, and calls him his countryman from North African Cirta (9. 6). Finally, the fact that the book has been handed down to us as the so-called "eighth book" of Arnobius suggests that the archetype was an edition of North African authors. As for the date, the *Octavius* was written between A.D. 160 and 250, for on the one hand Minucius quotes Fronto (9. 6; 31. 2), and on the other hand he is cited by Novatian, Sixtus and St. Cyprian. There are points which support a date after 197,<sup>2</sup> i.e. after Tertullian's *Apologeticum*: St. Jerome (*epist.* 70. 5) places Tertullian before Minucius; Lactantius, however, mentions him after Tertullian, but does not aim at a chronological order (*inst.* 5. 1. 21). Since Tertullian proves quite independent in many other cases, he is not likely to have adhered to Minucius<sup>3</sup> so closely. On the other hand Minucius, provided that he is the later author, follows the same principle in imitating Tertullian as he does in his adaptations of Cicero and Plato.<sup>4</sup>

The importance attached to Ciceronian and Vergilian quotations reminds us today more of Novatian and St. Cyprian than of Tertullian. The use of Ciceronian style, being typical of dialogue as a literary genre, is not

<sup>1</sup> Text: J. Beaujeu's edition of Minucius Felix (with a French translation and a commentary, Paris 1964). English translation with a commentary: G. W. Clarke, New York and Pyramus 1974 (*Ancient Christian Writers* 39).

<sup>2</sup> A. v. Hamack, *Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur bis Eusebius*, 2. Theil, *Die Chronologie*, 2. Bd., *Die Chronologie der Literatur von Irenaeus bis Eusebius* (Leipzig 1904), pp. 324-30.

<sup>3</sup> B. Axelson, *Das Prioritätsproblem Tertullian-Minucius Felix* (Lund 1941: *Skrifter utgivna av vetenskap-societeten i Lund* 27).

<sup>4</sup> C. Becker, *Der Octavius des Minucius Felix, Heidnische Philosophie und frühchristliche Apologetik*, *Sitzungsberichte* (München 1967), p. 2.

chronological evidence; but the fact that Minucius decided to adopt the form of dialogue (instead of the apologetical *libellus*) might give us a chronological hint. More important are the historical reasons: The Christian religion has penetrated into the sphere of Roman magistrates and martyrdom is no longer an immediate problem but a subject of philosophical and literary reflection (37); such an attitude is not likely to be adopted in times of persecution. Minucius' remarks on the emperor and the Roman Empire (25 ff.) are more contemptuous than Tertullian's and more typical, indeed, of a period of decay. The stress laid on philosophy at the cost of Christian dogma makes sense only in the third century. Another *terminus post quem* might be the foundation of the Serapeum in Rome under the rule of Caracalla (2. 4; 21. 3). The fact that Minucius is spiritually somewhat close to Arnobius is a further argument for dating him rather late, in particular under the reign of Alexander Severus, or between Maximinus Thrax and Decius.

Here someone might object that Fronto's attack must have been more recent if it is mentioned by Minucius. The answer would be that in antiquity Fronto had been a well-known author for a very long time, and, consequently, we are not compelled to consider him a contemporary of Minucius. Moreover, African authors are fond of quoting their countrymen, even when there are chronological or ideological barriers. Consider Augustine's references to Apuleius. It is then that the provinces begin to develop a literary and artistic life of their own. Finally Christian apologists often answer pagan attacks only after a delay of decades, as happened with Origen and Celsus.<sup>5</sup>

## II. Art and Reality<sup>6</sup>

It is true that the *Octavius* is meant to be a literary work of art in the tradition of the philosophical dialogue, not a mere record of a conversation that actually had taken place. However, the laws themselves of the literary genre encourage the introduction of real persons, whether they are friends of the author or representatives of an earlier generation. The death of a friend, used as an occasion on which to raise a literary monument for him, is in itself part of a literary tradition; nevertheless, the tradition does not exclude sincerity in the individual case. In general, ancient writers do not like mere fiction. They prefer formulating their personal experiences in terms of their literary experiences, and thereby conferring a more general resonance on them.

<sup>5</sup> We cannot judge of *De Fato Contra Mathematicos*, a book ascribed to Minucius; its authenticity was doubted by St. Jerome for stylistic reasons (Jerome, *vir. ill.* 58, *PL* 23, p. 669; cf. *epist.* 70. 5 *Ad Magnum*, ed. J. Labourt [Paris 1953], T. 3, p. 214).

<sup>6</sup> Excellent in Beaujeu, pp. xxiii-xxxi.

Another question, quite independent of the problem of historical truth, is the assimilation and transformation of things observed and experienced into a literary context. Minucius draws sensitive pictures of children (2. 1; 3. 5 ff.), and creates even more sophisticated portraits of adults. Octavius, the defender of Christianity, is a typical father, combining kindness with severity; his humor is generally urbane, although occasionally somewhat rustic (28. 9). First he challenges his partner by a slightly provincial puritanism; then he converts him by philosophical arguments. On the other hand, the pagan Caecilius is lively, even passionate and full of juvenile revolt at first; then he yields in a fair way and is firmly determined to convert his rhetorical defeat into a moral victory over himself. We shall return to the surprising but realistic mixture of philosophical skepticism and devotion to religious tradition in his character.

Now we have to consider how the dialogue fits into its epoch. At that time Christian apologetic writing in a dignified literary form was something new, and it made its appearance in Latin literature first. Minucius' claim to create a "classical" work of art, competing with Cicero and Plato, was a pretention unknown to the Greek apologists of that time. In that epoch, the Christian religion began to penetrate into the higher ranks of Roman society and strove to win an educated public. Anyone who knows the innate sensitivity of the Latin race in matters of language and their idolatry of formal perfection will understand that there were only very few educated Romans who voluntarily submitted themselves to the linguistic torture of reading the Bible in the raw Latin of Jerome's forerunners. It is obvious, consequently, that a book like the *Octavius* was in great demand as a means for converting the educated.

### III. Literary Genre, Sources, and Models

Tertullian, the great pioneer of Christian Latin literature and the immediate predecessor of Minucius, had stood somehow in his own light. His too subtle paradoxes were liable to convince insiders, rather than outsiders. His passionate metaphorical language made his work difficult to the point of obscurity, the heaviest of reproaches to a Latin author. In addition, even benevolent readers were deterred from reading his work because of his sectarianism. The variety and richness of Tertullian's work show that Christian Latin literature was *in statu nascendi*, but it also reflects the experimental stage of the corresponding Greek literature. This stage of "expansion" is followed by a period of "contraction," in which Minucius Felix restricts himself to a limited number of subjects; as far as choice of models is concerned, he prefers the Latin tradition. In this case a perfect artistic achievement occurs earlier in Latin Christian literature than in Greek. Equally, at the end of the patristic epoch, we shall find a literary achievement unparalleled in Greek literature, the *Consolatio* of Boethius. According to the judgment of many Hellenists, Atticism exerted a disastrous

influence on Greek literature by paralyzing its creative forces and reducing it to poverty. It is not up to us to decide if this is the full truth, even for the Greeks; Latin authors, struggling for a good style and emulating Cicero and other great authors, certainly undergo a strong discipline which is stimulating at the same time. So the rise of new classical books on Christian topics is favored.

The scientific level of argument and the artistic aspects of form, as well as the character of language and style, depend to some extent on literary genre. The choice of the philosophical dialogue, not used earlier by Christians against paganism, implies for a Latin author competition with Cicero. The problem especially concerns his five books *De natura deorum* because of their theological subject, and his dialogue *Hortensius* because of its being a "protrepticus." Even the use of a proper name as a title reminds us of this model. The two works of Cicero just mentioned will be preferred by Christian readers even later. Arnobius will declare that fanatical pagans ought to insist on burning the *De natura deorum* since by that book the Christian truths are confirmed (*adv. nat.* 3. 7). Augustine's first conversion will be due to his reading Cicero's *Hortensius* (*conf.* 3. 4. 7). So Minucius' choice of texts exerts an important influence on the Christian understanding of Cicero.<sup>7</sup>

Let us now enter into some particulars. The introduction, evoking the late friend, recalls the beginning of the second book *De oratore*; the technique of setting is reminiscent of *De legibus*. A dialogue which contains a warning against being seduced by specious arguments is inserted between the two speeches. This technique can be traced back to Plato (*Phaedo* 88b-90b). In addition, the *Octavius* follows a younger literary tradition<sup>8</sup> of oratorical contest in the presence of an umpire. Only since the end of the first century A.D. have umpires appeared in dialogues; authors were either following bucolic tradition or imitating real life. We find a hint of it in the Tacitean *Dialogus* (4.2-5.2), and more elaborate examples in Plutarch.<sup>9</sup> In the *Attic Nights* of Gellius (18. 1), one of Plutarch's friends, Favorinus of Arles, a renowned rhetorician of the second century A.D., acts as an umpire between a Stoic and a Peripatetic philosopher in a dispute on happiness. As in the *Octavius* the place of action is Ostia, and between the two speeches a short dialogue is inserted. Favorinus is a skeptic like Caecilius in the *Octavius*; one of his admirers is Fronto.

By his choice of setting and his insertion of the short dialogue Minucius seems to emphasize his opposition to Fronto's circle. Indeed, Fronto, a central figure of literary life in the second century, had attacked the

<sup>7</sup> I. Opelt, "Ciceros Schrift *De natura deorum* bei den lateinischen Kirchenvätern," *Antike und Abendland* 12 (1966), 141-55.

<sup>8</sup> W. Bachrens, "Literarische Beiträge," *Hermes* 50 (1915), 456-63; Beaujeu, pp. xx ff.

<sup>9</sup> *Quaestiones convivales* 1. 2. 2, 615E; 9. 15. 1, 747B; *Non posse suaviter vivi secundum Epicurum* 15, 1096F; *Amatorius* 3, 750A.

Christians, a fact explicitly mentioned by Minucius (9. 6; 31. 2). Was it a special speech against the Christians<sup>10</sup> or only an incidental attack? The delay of Minucius' answer, combined with the fact that Fronto is quoted only casually, suggests the first supposition: there is every reason to believe that it was a very well-known and important book by the rhetorician. If this is true, Latin literature gained a lead over the Greek in the field of anti-Christian polemics. This perspective is surprising only at first glance and fits without difficulty into that bilingual epoch. We may add as a parallel the fact that the *Octavius*, the first literary dialogue between a Christian and a pagan, was written in Latin too.

Minucius almost exclusively uses Latin authors. Along with Cicero and the tradition of Latin dialogue mentioned above, Seneca is a source of moral philosophy. For example, in chapters 36 ff., *De providentia* is used repeatedly. I am not sure if it is necessary to suppose a *florilegium* of Seneca in order to explain the stack of references to Seneca which will be found again in Lactantius.<sup>11</sup> Of course Minucius Felix also knew African authors, for he cites Apuleius' *De deo Socratis* (37. 9).

As for Greek apologists,<sup>12</sup> in spite of numerous similarities of theme, there are almost no positive verbal reminiscences. The reason may be that Minucius follows a different aim. It is true that the form of dialogue was used occasionally in anti-Jewish polemics. (Ariston of Pella wrote a dialogue between Jason and Papiskos about Christ, and Justin was the author of a dialogue with Tryphon.) It was also used perhaps in anti-heretical literature,<sup>13</sup> but Minucius is not at all likely to have known those writings. Usually the Greek apologies adopt the form of the *libellus*, a request to the legal authorities to end the persecution. There is no point in using this form in a time of religious peace. In fact, the *Octavius* is more a *protrepticus* than a juridical apology. Likewise, the content of such apologies does not serve Minucius' purpose. Aristeides and Theophilus refer to unclassical sources (Jewish authors) and give lengthy quotations from the Bible. Tatian even attacks Greek culture. One may add that at the time the rather modest quality of Greek apologetic writings was not a suitable model for an author who laid claim to higher literary standards. Once more, it was a Latin author who exerted a decisive influence on Minucius in this field, namely Tertullian.

<sup>10</sup> P. Frassinetti, "L'orazione di Frontone contro i Cristiani," *Giornale Italiano di Filologia* 2 (1949), 238-54.

<sup>11</sup> P. Courcelle, "Virgile et l'immanence divine chez Minucius Felix," *Mullus, Festschrift Th. Klauser* (Münster 1964: = *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum*, Ergänzungsband 1), pp. 34-42.

<sup>12</sup> Clarke, transl. p. 26.

<sup>13</sup> The debate between Manes and Archelaos, for instance, was written before 350, and therefore much later than the *Octavius* (*Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten 3 Jahrhunderte*, vol. 16, Hegemonius, *Acta Archelai*, ed. Ch. H. Beeson [Leipzig 1906<sup>1</sup>]). I am very grateful to L. Koenen for calling my attention to this book.)

Greek philosophers are often mentioned by Minucius. He is also our only witness for some doxographical material, but, as we can infer from some of his misunderstandings, he had not read those authors, except certain passages from Plato and Xenophon. Much evidence for the history of philosophy was taken from Cicero's *De Natura Deorum*, but the purpose had been skilfully changed. Minucius chose the main literary form of academic skepticism in order to combat skepticism. Agreements between Minucius and Clement of Alexandria suggest a dependence on Posidonius or a similar intermediate source with which Minucius complemented his Ciceronian model. Maybe it is easier to suppose a doxographical book or a *florilegium*. The most striking fact in this survey is perhaps the lack of direct quotations from the Bible; there are only allusions. This is owing to the purpose of the *Octavius*, which we shall consider later.

#### IV. Literary Technique

Before labelling the *Octavius* as a "mosaic" and condemning it, we have to consider the principles which determine its structure.<sup>14</sup> It is only in this context that we can grasp the function of its imitations. According to rhetorical principles, two contrary standpoints are explained in two parallel speeches. But though both speeches are constructed roughly in the same way, Minucius avoids pedantic symmetry. So the Christian's discourse is not only longer, but Octavius goes beyond the issues raised by the pagan by setting them in a wider context (see especially 19–20.1; 21–24; 26.8–27). Since they attempt to re-evaluate such terms as "religion" and "superstition," those digressions prove to be indispensable. In the same way as the two speeches, the introduction and the setting are connected with the book as a whole. This intention is manifest in the striking repetition of crucial terms. To the pagan "religion" is a synonym for paganism, and "superstition" a synonym for Christianity, and yet the same words have the opposite meaning for the Christian. If we compare the last sentences of the two speeches, the words are almost identical, the meanings opposite (13. 5 with 38. 7). The correspondence of the last sentences announces the conversion of the pagan. He will even be able to maintain his first statement, after the key words have acquired a new and deeper sense. The same words are stressed at the end of the preface (1. 5): Octavius leads Caecilius from "superstition" to "true religion" (*vera religio*). In its context this does not mean the "only true religion," but religion in the full sense of the word. The adjective is not merely a laudatory epithet but a differentiating one [similarly elsewhere, Minucius, speaking of "true" freedom (38), changes the traditional meaning of the word].

Such repetitions of key words help us to understand the unity of the *Octavius*; but they are also characteristic of the changes of the dialogue as a

<sup>14</sup> C. Becker, above, note 4.

genre. While Cicero in his dialogues tries to be impartial (though not succeeding so far as Epicureanism is concerned) and does not pretend to be a missionary, for Minucius the dialogue culminates in the conversion; this is an advantage from the dramatic point of view. Thus a real change of attitude arises from the theoretical discussion.

The kiss by which Caecilius pays homage to the pagan god Serapis (2. 4) is an important link between the setting and the book as a whole. By this gesture the theme of the book, religion and superstition, is symbolized. It immediately provokes Octavius' reproach (3. 1) and ultimately the debate (cf. 4. 3 ff.). Finally it finds its match in Caecilius' embracing the Christian religion. Similarly, the key word "wisdom" occurs in the introduction (1. 4), the setting (3. 2; 4. 4), and at the end (40. 1), partly accompanied by its antonym "error." The artistic unity is enhanced by the elaborate framework and by the effects of perspective. There are three chronological levels in the preface: the present (Minucius as an elderly man who lost his friend Octavius), a remote past (Minucius and Octavius as young people), and a past closer to the present (the visit of Octavius and the conversion of Caecilius). Thus, the time of the dialogue is symmetrically framed by two more periods of time, while the friendship with Octavius lasted through all three epochs of the author's life. This kind of framing favors a sympathetic approach and aesthetic distance at the same time.<sup>15</sup>

Another hint that helps the reader to understand the artistic design of the *Octavius* is given by the author, who sometimes unmasks himself. Obviously, the pagan's ideas oscillate between theoretical atheism and practical acceptance of the traditional cults. It is true that this attitude is psychologically probable and even typical of the mentality of educated people of that time, but nevertheless Octavius needs only to point out this manifest inconsistency in order to be sure of winning the game. Minucius not only notices that problem; he even stresses it in an ironical way. He makes Octavius ask himself if the talk of Caecilius has been muddled on purpose, or if it stumbles by mistake (16. 1). For a moment, the reader becomes the accomplice of the author who between the lines prides himself on his predilection for Christianity. (Compare the literary Minucius in the inserted talk, the one-sidedness of which was rightly challenged by Caecilius.) This re-evaluation of partiality is symptomatic of the change of dialogue as a genre from Cicero to Minucius, who gives a new orientation to traditional material.

The author's design also causes important changes of form and style. In this respect, the passages which we can compare with Tertullian are most eloquent. Crude naturalism is avoided, sentences lacking in symmetry are harmonized, rough syntax is smoothed. Minucius is fond of *dicola* and

<sup>15</sup> Different levels of action are also found in the setting: the serious contest is playfully anticipated in the world of children (cf. the vocabulary of contest and victory in chapters 3 and 40).

*tricola*, and of *chiasmus* and *parallelism*. Even more characteristic is his use of *asyndeta* with a lively effect (3. 6; 20. 5; 7. 6; 17. 5) and significant *hyperbata*, which concentrate complex meaning into a single artistic unit ("et illam oculorum etiam in seriis hilaritatem," 4. 2). Since Minucius follows the rules of classical prose rhythm very strictly, even monotonously, it is all the more difficult to reconstruct the text of Fronto he had attacked. In fact, because of his ideas on Latin style, Minucius cannot but change each sentence of his model. While Fronto is fond of rare and unfamiliar words, Minucius tries to avoid them. That applies even to technical terms of Christian theology. It is true that his Latin is not quite Ciceronian (the verb *effigiare*, for instance, is first attested in the writings of his African countryman Apuleius) and other expressions are colloquial, archaic, or poetic (especially in the descriptions of nature). On the whole, however, Minucius' language<sup>16</sup> is both modern and classical, both up to date and timeless. His liking for excessive symmetry reveals the hand of a late writer; yet, many expressions, pregnant with meaning and full of freshness, give evidence of a technique that has reached the level of art.

The metaphors are chosen carefully; according to the missionary purpose, symbols that are common to pagans and Christians are found at crucial points of the text. In the introduction, while speaking of his own conversion, Minucius uses the venerable language of Greek mysteries to give a background for the conversion of his friends: "When I emerged from the depths of darkness to the light of wisdom and truth" (1. 4). These metaphors which are frequently used in antiquity (even by Lucretius, e.g. III. 1) take on a new meaning when pronounced by a Christian (baptism being literally a process of diving and emerging), without giving offence to the pagan reader.

The same may be said of the allegory of fighting, which equally fits the Stoic sage and the Christian martyr (37). Another example is the metaphor of gold proved by fire (36. 9; Sen., *Prov.* 5. 10 and NT I Petr. 1:6). If Octavius occasionally chooses a vulgar metaphor (28. 9), this suits well his being characterized as an "offspring of Plautus' race, the foremost of bakers" (14. 1). But the passage is also significant in itself, since Serapis, the god of a mystery religion competing with Christianity, is the target of the crude joke. The unholy *flatus ventris* is certainly meant to counterbalance the pious kiss thrown by Caecilius to Serapis. It becomes evident that in the course of the dialogue paganism is degraded from "religion" to "superstition." Likewise, the almost imperceptible process of devaluation of heathen philosophy culminates in the bold caricature of Socrates as a clown from Attica (38. 5). Equally, the strong metaphor *erupit* ("he burst out") is kept for Caecilius' utterances (16. 5; 40. 1), a feature in harmony

<sup>16</sup> Valuable comments on language and style: E. Löfstedt, *Syntactica*, vol. I (Lund 1928, 1956<sup>2</sup>), pp. 192, 256, 342; vol. II (Lund 1933), p. 384, note 1; idem, *Vermischte Studien zur lateinischen Sprachkunde und Syntax* (Lund 1936), pp. 74, 83, 148.



with his volcanic temper and the suddenness of his conversion. Thus the range of stylistic devices and rhetorical colors used by Minucius is by no means poor; just because he uses the brighter colors more rarely, their effect in the context is all the more striking.

### V. Philosophical and Religious Aspects

Minucius is the only Christian apologist not to enter into Christological problems; he does not even mention the name of Christ. He confines himself to the items of monotheism, divine providence, the purity of Christian life, and the immortality of the soul (34. 8). We shall come back to the motives for this reserve.

Like many other Church Fathers before the middle of the third century, Minucius is strongly influenced by Stoic philosophy, a fact due not only to Tertullian's impact. Chrysippus' theology and his physical interpretation of myths are best transmitted to us by Minucius (19. 11). He is the only witness for the philosophy of Persaios of Kition (21. 2). He paints the clearest picture of an attempt to connect the Stoic doctrine of *ecpyrosis* (the destruction of the world through fire) with the Biblical concept of the end of the world (34); his praise of creation as a proof of the existence of God is particularly striking (17). He is the only author to mention Britain as an example of divine providence, since the lack of sunshine there is recompensed by the warmth of the sea [an allusion to the Gulf Stream, taken undoubtedly from a Stoic author (18. 3)]. Together with the Stoics, Minucius thinks that in the best of all worlds everything is arranged at its best and for man's best good—a kind of anthropocentric optimism that had seemed rather problematic to a man like Kelsos. Just like the Stoics and even more than Tertullian, Minucius lays stress on the fact that man is intimately connected with the universe and with God (11. 1; 17. 2), an idea he has in common with Gnostics and Middle Platonists (Asclepius 10). In a Stoic vein (though in opposition to the supercilious intellectual arrogance of Caecilius), Octavius declares (18. 11) reason and perception to be given to all human beings without any difference, an opinion expressed already by Tertullian (*Apol.* 17. 5–6). Moral items (such as the virtue of martyrs, poverty, the worthlessness of the theatre) are treated in the manner of the Stoic and Cynic diatribe. The idea that our hearts must be the temple of God and the place for true worship (32) harmonizes with Stoic (Sen., fr. 123 Haase) and Epicurean thought (Lucr. V. 1198–1203). Another feature Minucius shares with these schools of thought is his so-called materialism in spiritual matters, the lack of ability or readiness to consider spirit as something totally immaterial and abstract. Although he uses Stoic arguments to prove the existence of divine providence, Minucius, who believes in free will, rejects Stoic determinism.

Plato also plays an important role—a fact which, by the way, favors dating Minucius in the transitional stage between the “Stoic” and the

"Platonic" period of patristic thought, which is the second quarter of the third century A.D. The short dialogue inserted between the two speeches, the form and content of which are influenced by Plato, is used by Minucius Felix to attack academic skepticism. The Christian author reverses the function of Velleius' "Epicurean" catalogue of philosophers (as it is to be found in Cicero's *De Natura Deorum*). Minucius gives it not only a positive purpose but also a new culmination by quoting Plato, who is assigned a place of honor among the precursors of Christianity. Finally, Middle Platonism seems to have exerted an influence also on Minucius' anthropology and demonology.

On the whole, our author advocates a very moderate attitude toward pagan philosophy, more similar to Justin and Athenagoras than to Tertullian (not to mention Theophilus of Antioch). Nevertheless, during the dialogue there is some change in this respect. First, Minucius contents himself with stating agreements (34. 8), but he is not unaware of the differences (cf. 19. 15 the qualification expressed through *ferre*). In principle, the superiority of revelation is presupposed already in 19. 4 and 15; yet the denigration of worldly wisdom is prepared for very cautiously, with criticism becoming more pointed only towards the end.

In a similar way, the concept of wisdom changes. Being a clever psychologist, Minucius does not insist on the paradoxes of faith, which are not likely to convince outsiders, but he makes the pagan Caecilius raise the question of "wisdom." Just because of its ambiguity, this word is a useful starting point for a dialogue (for instance, it has a Christian meaning in 16. 5). Like Minucius himself (1. 4), Caecilius will get rid of his "blindness" (*caecus*, cf. 3. 1; 4. 3) and achieve wisdom and insight into truth. Because of this metamorphosis, the oratorical contest becomes a dramatic process, in the course of which the pagan unmasks his own intellectual arrogance. In the beginning of the contest he presumes to defend wisdom and to teach the uneducated, conceited Christians to know themselves. Later on, however, he becomes enraptured with his own eloquence and falls into a naive pride, which gives the lie to his talk on modesty. Seen against the background of Caecilius' presumption, the thesis of Octavius, which represents wisdom as innate in all human beings, has a specifically Christian ring (which it may lose if detached from its context). In this way the dialogue gains a philosophical meaning as an intellectual process. Hence we are supposed to respect the specific function of elements in their context without emphasizing doctrines in isolation.

What is the role of philosophy in our dialogue? Minucius explicitly states that the terms "Christians" and "philosophers" are equivalent (20. 1), and thus he varies Plato's famous saying about kings and philosophers, in the spirit of Justin or Athenagoras. This alliance with philosophy offers considerable advantages in the discussion with paganism. On the one hand, a long time ago Greek philosophy had furnished several more or less critical approaches to pagan religion: first, the allegorical interpretation of mythical

persons as natural phenomena, as was done by the philosophers from the sixth century B.C. to the Stoics; second, the rationalistic and historical reinterpretation of gods as great men, as represented by Euhemerus; third, moralistic criticism of myths, as attested from Xenophanes and Plato onwards; finally, the integration of gods into a hierarchy of demons in the style of the Middle Platonists.

On the other hand, there was an eminently positive argument. At that time most of the philosophical schools had embraced monotheism as a scientific theory and described piety, not in terms of ritual, but of moral attitude. Many educated pagans, while theoretically accepting monotheism, in practice stuck to polytheism. In that situation the Christians who, along with the Jews, were the only ones to profess a monotheistic religion, had every reason to share a common cause with the philosophers and to recommend their religion as the only one scientifically proven and acceptable. Far from being a representative of liberal theology, an antique Renan, Minucius expounded his beliefs in a rationalistic way because the historical situation and the mentality of educated readers imposed it on him. Hence, the absence of direct quotations from the Bible is no proof of Minucius' ignorance in theological matters; he just chooses an "exoteric" form of preaching to reach all people of good will. While other Christians usurp the role of philosophers and sophists in a more popular way, down to the adaptation of the philosophers' beards and their miraculous legends, Minucius challenges scientific discussion.

Let us finally have a look at the philosophical and religious ideas truly alive in Minucius' day. Not long before him lived Sextus Empiricus. Thus, in the domain of philosophy, the Skeptics, not the Stoics or the "dogmatic" Platonists, are his real enemies. Hence the final assault against their alleged ancestor, Socrates. In the field of religion, neither the brilliant attacks against ancient Roman religion, which had long been moribund, nor those against Greek mythology, which had almost completely turned into literature, are really relevant. The dangerous rivals of Christian religion are first the cult of the emperor, a hazardous item that Minucius cautiously avoids, and second the gods of mysteries, among whom he chooses Serapis as the object of his derision. By dating the conversion at the grape harvest, a time preferred for initiations to the mysteries of Isis,<sup>17</sup> Minucius seems to give an additional hint of his polemical attitude towards a cult very much in favor at that time in Africa and Rome.

## VI. Tradition and Influence

Later stories of conversions [St. Cyprian's (*ad Donatum* 1), Augustine's,<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> P. Courcelle, *Les Confessions de Saint Augustin dans la tradition littéraire. Antécédents et postérité* (Paris 1963), p. 122.

<sup>18</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 121 ff.

Ennodius' (334)] can hardly be understood without Minucius as a model. Also his reading of Cicero's *De Natura Deorum* and *Hortensius* has found followers. Lactantius is greatly indebted to him; St. Jerome passes judgment on his style; in modern times, Minucius is especially appreciated by Renan.<sup>19</sup>

The dialogue *Octavius* has been handed down to us as the "eighth (*octavus*) book of Arnobius" in a ninth-century manuscript (Paris. 1661), which is handsome but full of errors. A copy of it to be found in Brussels is of little use. The excerpts in a book ascribed to St. Cyprian (*Quod idola dii non sint*<sup>20</sup>) are more helpful for establishing the text. In chapter 18. 8 for instance, Pseudo-Cyprian supplies the original words *tactu purior est*, which are lacking in the manuscripts.

## VII. Conclusion

Minucius opens a new era in Latin apologetic writing. Intellectually, he is more closely related to Arnobius and Lactantius than to Tertullian. So far as the content is concerned, it is less important for Minucius to answer the current reproaches against Christianity than to appeal to philosophical thought and culture in a positive sense. He is aware of the Roman tradition and of his educated Roman public. In dogmatic affairs, his reticence is equally due to his public; consequently, some generations later it is no longer understood. It seems high time to stress the "scientific" approach of Minucius' "untheological" way of preaching. He is no deist. As for the literary aspects of his work, it announces a first, real renaissance of Cicero's philosophical works. In Minucius' *Octavius*, Christian apologetic writing comes to an artistic, harmonious, almost classical form. If this happens for once earlier in Latin literature than in Greek, it is because of the especially persistent tradition of the Latin dialogue.

*University of Heidelberg*

<sup>19</sup> *Octavius*, introd. e commento a cura di M. Pellegrino (Torino, Soc. Ed. Internaz. 1947), pp. 49 ff. (= E. Renan, *Marc-Aurèle et la fin du monde antique*, ed. Calmann-Lévy [Paris 1925<sup>23</sup>]), p. 389.

<sup>20</sup> Courcelle, *op. cit.*, thinks it genuine; usually it is thought to be later than Lactantius.