

Zeitschrift: Theologische Zeitschrift
Herausgeber: Theologische Fakultät der Universität Basel
Band: 26 (1970)
Heft: 1

Artikel: Athenagoras on the Location of God
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-878749>

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Athenagoras on the Location of God

Athenagoras of Athens offers his first major exposition of a Christian doctrine in chapter VIII of his *Supplicatio pro Christianis* (ca. A.D. 177). Here he claims to be giving a rational argument (λογισμός) for the Christian belief in the unity of God.

1.

Although his debt to other philosophers, especially to the Stoics and to Philo of Alexandria has been pointed out, it has also been admitted that in the finer points, viz. on the place a multiplicity of gods would occupy, the argument is his own¹. Noting that modern assessments of Athenagoras's effort have for the most part been unfavourable², R. M. Grant in a suggestive manner has recently re-examined the passage³. He finds philosophical models for Athenagoras in Philo, the Stoics, Corpus Hermeticum XI, and especially in the pseudo-Aristotelian *De Melisso Xenophane Gorgia*. Against this background, and with assumptions that are both Platonic and Christian, Athenagoras is said to develop his argument on the location of God. Grant suggests that the argument "seems to find a *Sitz im Leben* if at least in part, and perhaps as a whole, it was originally produced as a semiphilosophical reply to Marcion and then was used again in relation to philosophy"⁴. As I have elsewhere demonstrated, Athenagoras's exposition of Christian doctrine in chapters IV-XII follows the framework of a *Middle Platonist* epitome of Plato's philosophy like Albinus's *Didaskalikos*, and his argument on the location of God comes at a point appropriate to such a summary⁵. I here suggest that an examination of Athenagoras's argument on the location of God will reveal that it is based on a misconception of the nature of the Christian God.

¹ J. Geffcken, *Zwei griechische Apologeten* (1907), pp. 177–179. References to the *Supplicatio* are to this edition.

² Geffcken (n. 1), p. 179; A. Puech, *Les apologistes grecs* (1912), pp. 185f.; C. C. Richardson, *Early Christian Fathers* (1953), p. 295; J. H. Crehan, *Athenagoras* (1956), p. 131.

³ R. M. Grant, *The Early Christian Doctrine of God* (1966), pp. 105–110.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

⁵ A. J. Malherbe, *The Structure of Athenagoras, Supplicatio pro Christianis: Vigiliae Christianae* 23 (1969), pp. 1–20.

goras's argument against this background can lead to greater precision in determining his philosophical models and his own use of them.

The argument of chapter VIII is expository in character rather than polemical. But Athenagoras's polemic in chapters XVII-XXII, where he attacks the existence of the pagan gods, reveals the Platonic understanding of the nature of God that is assumed in his exposition in chapter VIII. It is important for Athenagoras that a god should be *ἐξ ἀρχῆς* and *ἀγένητος*. So he repeatedly levels the charge at the pagan gods that they did not exist *ἐξ ἀρχῆς* and therefore cannot be gods⁶. The Christian God alone is *ἀγένητος* and without beginning. To prove this claim he quotes Timaeus 27D in Suppl. XIX p. 135, 3–9 and frequently formulates his polemic in language derived from this passage in Plato or justified by it⁷.

2.

To prove God's uniqueness, Athenagoras considers where the location of a multiplicity of gods would be. Two possibilities are open: They were either in the same place, or each of them was separately in his own⁸. The introduction of *τόπος* at this point in the discussion of the nature of God may very well have been suggested by the fact that it also occurs in a corresponding place in a Middle Platonic epitome of Plato's thought. Thus Albinus, apparently thinking of Parmenides 138 BC and Theaetetus 181D, also mentions *τόπος*, albeit only incidentally, when he discusses God as

⁶ E.g. Athenag., Suppl. XVII p. 132, 26ff., 133, 23ff.

⁷ The influence of Tim. 27CD can be detected in IV p. 123, 10ff.; VI p. 124, 25, 29; X p. 127, 14f.; XVII p. 133, 24; XVIII p. 134, 9; XIX p. 135, 3ff.; XX p. 135, 25; XXI p. 138, 16; XXIV p. 142, 30f.; XXX p. 150, 5. The argument in chapter XVII on the history of the statues and names of the gods is a polemical application of this principle, and is not in the first place designed, as Geffcken thinks (op. cit., pp. 193–196), to impress Athenagoras's readers.

⁸ As the author (n. 5) has pointed out, p. 15 n. 77, the whole argument of chapter VIII deals with the place of the gods, and not their genera, as Ubaldi, Bardy, Crehan and Grant understand it. Maranus and Otto correctly see the argument as dealing with the place of God.

ἀρχικός⁹. Although Albinus does not give an extended discussion of the subject here, space was a frequent topic of speculation among later Platonists¹⁰.

Athenagoras first denies that more than one god could be in the same place. If they were gods, and therefore ἀγένητοι, they would be unlike each other. Only created things are like their patterns, whereas uncreated things are unlike, οὕτε ἀπό τινος οὕτε πρός τινα γενόμενα (p. 126, 2f.). The unexpressed conclusion seems to be that objects are alike because they are made after the same pattern. His line of thought here is generally Platonic. The Ideas are described by second century Platonists as patterns. An Idea is that ἐκ τινός and πρός τι something is created¹¹. Athenagoras is familiar with the Middle Platonic view of the Ideas, and in fact describes the Logos, whose primary function for him is that it is the agent of creation¹², in language borrowed from Middle Platonic descriptions of the Ideas¹³. Furthermore, the view that likeness between objects derives from their common participation in the Ideas may be based on a certain understanding of passages from Plato such as Parmenides 128A, 132CD. Nevertheless, the combination in this way of the argument of space with the doctrine of Ideas is not found elsewhere¹⁴.

How τόπος was conceived of by Athenagoras's contemporaries helps to clarify his reasoning. The Stoics defined space as τὸ ἔχόμενον ὑπὸ σώματος¹⁵, or more fully, they held space to be τὸν ὑπὸ ὄντος (sc. σώματος) κατεχόμενον καὶ ἐξισαζόμενον τῷ κατέχοντι αὐτόν¹⁶.

⁹ Albinus, Didask. X 7 p. 63 Louis. Cf. also XI 1 p. 65, where he argues that if qualities were bodies two or more bodies would be in the same place, which is most absurd.

¹⁰ H. Leisegang, *Die Raumtheorie im späteren Platonismus* (1911).

¹¹ E.g. Albinus, Didask. IX 1 p. 51; IX 3 p. 53. Cf. A.-J. Festugière, *Le 'compendium Timaei' de Galien: Rev. d. ét. gr.* 65 (1952), pp. 106f.

¹² Cf. Athenag., Suppl. IV p. 123, 20ff.; VI p. 124, 30f.; X p. 127, 17ff.

¹³ E.g. the Son is the eternal thought of God, the λόγος τοῦ πατρὸς ἐν ἴδεᾳ καὶ ἐνεργείᾳ· προς αὐτοῦ γὰρ καὶ δι' αὐτοῦ πάντα ἐγένετο (X p. 127, 22f.). See my article, *The Holy Spirit in Athenagoras: Journ. Theol. Stud.* (forthcoming).

¹⁴ Geffcken (n. 1), p. 177.

¹⁵ Aetius, *Placita I*, 20, 1 p. 317, 33 Diels.

¹⁶ Sext. Emp., *Adv. math.* X, 3; cf. Pyrrh. *hypot.* III, 124; Arist., *Physics* IV p. 211a, 27ff.

Middle Platonists appropriated this view, and regarded space as filled with matter in such a way that it could be equated with matter¹⁷. Space would therefore seem to be something corporeal, as Plutarch indeed held it to be¹⁸, and as such it would have the capability of receiving the Forms¹⁹, and so can also be defined as τὸ μεταληπτικὸν τῶν εἰδῶν, ὅπερ εἴρηκε μεταφορικῶς τὴν ὅλην καθάπερ, τινὰ τιθήντην καὶ δεξαμένην²⁰. The identification of an object with the space it occupies, and the participation of that space in the Ideas were thus not unknown conceptions in the school philosophy of Athenagoras's day. He only speaks hypothetically, of course, when he assigns God to a particular place, and he does not of course think of God as corporeal, nor does he work out the exact relationship between God and the space He would occupy. What he does is to use the categories of contemporary philosophical discussion to argue, on the basis of Platonic and Christian assumptions, for the uniqueness of God.

Athenagoras next raises the question whether a multiplicity of gods could be complementary parts (συμπληρωτικὰ μέρη) of each other, and God in this sense be one, while admitting the existence of other divine beings (p. 126, 3–5). Geffcken has noted the Stoic influence in the metaphor of the members of the body and has suggested that Athenagoras is here polemicizing against the Stoics²¹. This may be so²², but it is more likely that the Stoic elements in this argument came to him via his Middle Platonic models which had already assimilated much of Stoicism. Albinus, for example, in his description of God had affirmed that God is no part of anything, nor a whole possessing any parts, and had elaborated on the

¹⁷ Cf. Leisegang (n. 10); Plutarch, *De an. procr.* in *Tim.* 6 p. 1014E; Albinus, *Didask.* VIII, 2 p. 49.

¹⁸ Plut., *De an. procr.* in *Tim.* 5 p. 1014BD; 24 p. 1024C. According to Albinus, however, matter in itself is only potentially a body. Cf. *Didask.* VIII, 3 p. 51. See also the uncertainty of Apuleius, *De dogmate I*, 5 on the subject.

¹⁹ Cf. Albinus, *Didask.* VIII, 2 p. 49, and the Platonic source behind Diog. Laert. III, 69. 76.

²⁰ Aetius, *Placita I*, 19, 1 p. 317, 23ff.

²¹ Geffcken (n. 1), p. 178.

²² Cf. Athenag., *Suppl. XXII* p. 139, 17ff. But notice that in VI p. 124, 31ff. and XVI p. 132, 9ff. it is the Peripatetics who hold that God is a composite being, his body being the ethereal region.

theme. Albinus's basic argument is that a part is prior to that of which it is a part, which would rule out God's being ἀρχικός²³. He equally firmly rejects the possibility that God might be corporeal²⁴. Athenagoras's reply to the suggestion that God might in some sense be a composite body is not dissimilar to that of Albinus, and is as firm: δὸς δὲ ἀγένητος καὶ ἀπαθῆς καὶ ἀδιαιρέτος· οὐκ ἀρα συνεστῶς ἐκ μερῶν (p. 126, 6ff.). As we have seen, that God is ἀγένητος and ἐξ ἀρχῆς is for Athenagoras a Platonic axiom and can be assumed to underlie his thinking here.

3.

The other alternative to the argument is that a second or more gods and the Creator would each be in their own places. Athenagoras then reasons that a second god would be either in this world or in another world. He cannot, however, be in this world, for the God who created it as a closed, spherical entity is above His creation and controls it by His providence (p. 126, 9ff.). Neither is there place for a second god in another world, for the Creator has filled everything (p. 126, 19f., 25f.). Even if he should be in another world and its sphere, he is in no way concerned with us, for he does not control this world, nor is he great in power, for he is circumscribed by space (p. 126, 18). Thus, not only does the other god have no place to occupy, neither does he have any function to perform. So, since he neither creates, nor exercises providence, nor has any place, Athenagoras concludes, εἰς οὐτος ἐξ ἀρχῆς καὶ μόνος ὁ ποιητὴς τοῦ κόσμου θεός (p. 126, 27f.).

Grant has suggested that Athenagoras's description of the world as a sphere may have been influenced by the *De Melisso Xenophane Gorgia* which claims that God is spherical²⁵. Such dependence is highly implausible. Athenagoras knows that Aristotle was claimed to have said that God is spherical, and he explicitly rejects the

²³ Albinus, *Didask.* X, 4 p. 59; X, 7 p. 63. Cf. also Philo, *De poster.* Caini 3.

²⁴ Albinus, *Didask.* X, 8 p. 63f.

²⁵ Grant (n. 3), pp. 107f.

²⁶ Athenag., *Suppl.* VI p. 124, 31ff., where Athenagoras is dependent for his information on a doxography (cf. VI p. 124, 22ff.).

idea²⁶, as he does the view ascribed to Aristotle, that things sub-lunary were outside God's providence²⁷. He could have gotten the description from a Platonic source like Apuleius, *De Platone* I, 8, "Hence (Plato says) that there is one world, and in it all things; nor is there a place left in which another world could be... It has been sought by the creating God in behalf of the world, which, like a beautiful and perfect sphere, is the most perfect and beautiful, that it should be in want of nothing, and contain all things by shutting in and restraining them, and be beautiful and wonderful, like and answering to himself."²⁸ Furthermore, that Platonists were interested in the question whether Providence could exist in more worlds than one, should there be any, is clear from Plutarch²⁹. Athenagoras may be dependent, as has been claimed, on Philo for the idea that God has filled the world³⁰, but it is also found in Albinus³¹.

*

We conclude, then, that Athenagoras had models for his argument on the place of God in Middle Platonic discussions of space and of God and the world. The topics he uses, if not the way in which he uses them, are, for instance, taken up by Plutarch when he attacks the Stoic view of the universe: the universe as $\sigma\hat{\omega}\mu\alpha$, $\sigma\hat{\omega}\mu\alpha$ and $\tau\hat{\omega}\pi\varsigma$, the activity of the universe, the universe as a part or a whole, the perfection of the universe, and the universe as cause³². Athenagoras

²⁷ Athenag., Suppl. XXV. Athenagoras shares the bias of his Middle Platonist contemporaries against Aristotle on these matters. Cf. Carl Andresen, *Justin und der mittlere Platonismus*: *Zs. ntl. Wiss.* 44 (1952–53), p. 161.

²⁸ Apuleius is thinking of *Timaeus* 33AB. Other Platonists understood Plato to have been willing to admit to the possibility of five worlds, but personally to have held to one. For the uneasiness with which a plurality of worlds was viewed, see Plutarch, *De def. or.* 389F, 422A, 430B.

²⁹ Plut., *De def. or.* 423C, 425E–426E. On Middle Platonic interest in providence, see ps.-Plutarch, *De fato*, and the discussion by P. de Lacy and B. Einarson, *Plutarch: Moralia* VII (1959), pp. 303ff.

³⁰ Philo, *Leg. alleg.* III, 4; *De confus. ling.* 136. For Philo's view of $\tau\hat{\omega}\pi\varsigma$, see Leisegang (n. 10), pp. 27–46, and *Theol. Wört.*, 6 (1959), pp. 287f.; 8 (1969), pp. 201f.

³¹ Albinus, *Didask.* X, 3 p. 59.

³² Plut., *De comm. not.* 30 pp. 1073A–1074A.

goras uses his models with presuppositions that are both Platonic and Christian. Statements on the location of God are also made by other second century Christian apologists³³, and the subject may later have become an important enough part of Christian polemic to call forth pagan response³⁴, but to Athenagoras belongs the credit to have been the first Christian writer to give prolonged attention to it.

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³³ Aristides, *Apol.* I, 5; Theophilus, *Ad Autol.* II, 3 (cf. also II, 10). See also *Mart. SS. Iust. et Soc.* III, and from a later period, *ps.-Justin, Quaest. Christianorum ad Gentiles* V.

³⁴ A. D. Nock believes that the assertion of Sallustius (II p. 2, 14) that the gods are free from limitations of space may possibly be a counter to Christian polemic, cf. Sallustius: *Concerning the Gods and the Universe* (1926), p. xlvi.