

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Vox Evangelica* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_vox_evangelica.php

**GREAT LIVES IN TROUBLED TIMES:
THE DATE AND SETTING OF THE *OCTAVIUS*
BY MINUCIUS FELIX**

PETER JAMES COUSINS

What are we to make of the *Octavius*? The book itself is clear enough in its form: three men are out for an afternoon stroll along the beach at Ostia and the subject of their conversation turns to religion, the Christian lawyer Octavius challenges the pagan Caecilius to a debate, and his forceful arguments carry the day. Now, many years later, Marcus Minucius Felix hears of the death of Octavius and records the events of that momentous occasion long before.¹ However, the book remains enigmatic. There is no consensus of opinion about when or where it was written. Its language is elegant, and the ample quotations from pagan sources reveal the author's erudition. Yet we observe that the book never mentions Christ by name, never quotes Scripture directly, nor appeals to the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies in the gospel events. It discusses neither the Logos nor the Trinity, nor does it give information concerning church life. At least one commentator has even doubted that the author was a Christian.² Arguments from silence are unlikely to help us unravel its mysteries, so we must look at the book's most obvious characteristic, namely, its sharp sense of ethical supremacy. It claims that the pagan world has failed to live up to its own ideals and only Christians live great lives now. This hint of troubled times invites us to take the historical context into consideration. We shall conclude that setting the work in a North African context after AD 260 brings it into sharper focus and throws light on the developing relationship between the pagan world and

¹ There is discussion about whether the dialogue actually took place or whether it is a literary construction based on real or imaginary characters. See G.W. Clarke, 'The Historical Setting of the *Octavius* of Minucius Felix', *Journal of Religious History* 4 (1966-67), 268-69. Given the strong influence of Cicero on the work, Clarke's conclusion seems to be a fair one, i.e. Minucius followed Cicero's convention in that the characters were historical, the dialogue not. Note also that Suetonius (*de Rhetoribus* 1) sets a dispute on the seashore at Ostia, and Lucian (*Erotes* 13) initiates a dispute about love after a kiss is blown to a statue.

² G. Torti, 'Note minuciane', *Rivista di Studi Classici* 23 (1976), 359-66. But against this see C. Becker, 'Der *Octavius* des Minucius Felix', *Sitzungsberichte Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* 2 (1967).

Christianity. Only then does the full force of the book's reasoning become apparent.

The majority of commentators date the book around AD 230 in the 'Great Peace' that existed before the Decian onslaught. The main clue is its similarity with Tertullian's *Apologeticum* and *Ad Nationes*. Not only are there numerous passages which are almost identical, but also the books have their main themes in common. Although some historians claim priority for the *Octavius*, Beaujeu's argument has never been refuted, namely, that as the *Octavius* only resembles two of Tertullian's many works it must be that Minucius Felix had these two works at hand when he was composing his own book.³ There seems to be no logical ground for proposing the contrary and arguing that Tertullian used the *Octavius* extensively in two of his earliest works and then betrayed no further knowledge of it over the next twenty years. Doubtful, though, is Beaujeu's conclusion that the book is 'a refined, capable, if bland compilation of Christian and pagan sources; more especially it is an adaptation of Tertullian for an educated elite'.⁴ Tertullian also wrote apologies for the elite, and Minucius Felix takes a very different line on several important issues. However, even if we establish that Minucius wrote at a later date than Tertullian we do not know how soon afterwards it was.

There are signs of dependency between the *Octavius* and Cyprian, and most commentators argue that the Bishop of Carthage borrowed from Minucius Felix. If they were to be proved right then we should have to date the *Octavius* in or before the Great Peace. However, philological considerations lead George L. Carver to disagree and he concludes that Cyprian wrote first.⁵ Philological arguments are notoriously inconclusive, so it is not surprising that his arguments have not convinced everybody, yet neither have they been successfully refuted. He argues that few of the supposed parallels are close enough

³ Jean Beaujeu, *Minucius Felix: Octavius* (Paris: Société d'Édition 'Les Belles Lettres', 1964), lvii. For the priority of the *Octavius* see Gilles Quispel, 'African Christianity before Minucius Felix and Tertullian', in J. den Boeft and A.H.M. Kessels (eds.), *Actus: Studies in Honour of H.L.W. Nelson* (Utrecht: Instituut Voor Klassieke Talen, 1982), 309. Also Marta Sordi, 'L'analogia del martire romano Apollonio come fonte dell'*Apologeticum* di Tertulliano e i rapporti fra Tertulliano e Minucio', *Rivista di Storia della Chiesa in Italia* 18 (1964), 169-88; S. Rossi, 'L'*Octavius* fu scritto prima del 161', *Giornale Italiano di Filologia* 12 (1959), 289-304.

⁴ Beaujeu, *Octavius*, xciii, xciv.

⁵ George L. Carver, 'Minucius Felix and Cyprian: The Question of Priority', *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 108 (1978), 21-34. For the opposing view see Beaujeu, *Octavius*, lxxvii-lxxiv, and Michael M. Sage, *Cyprian* (Cambridge: Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1974), 53-60.

to be of any help, but evidence of style suggests the priority of Cyprian in the three instances where there is strong similarity: *De bono patientiae* 3/398.18 and *Octavius* 38.6, *Ad Donatum* 13.1ff. and *Octavius* 2.3, 4, and *Ad Demetrianum* 25369.24 and *Octavius* 1.4. It is significant that the vital phrase in the *Octavius*, where the author triumphantly concludes that Christians do not preach great things but live them, corresponds closely to Cyprian. *Octavius* 38.6 reads:

Nos non habitu sapientiam sed mente praeferimus, non eloquimur magna sed vivimus. gloriamur nos consecutos quod illi summa intentione quaesiverunt nec invenire potuerunt.

Compare with *De Bono Patientiae* 3:

nos autem, fratres dilectissimi, qui philosophi non verbis sed factis sumus, nec vestitu sapientiam sed veritate praeferimus, qui virtutum conscientiam magis quam iactantiam novimus, qui non loquimur magna sed vivimus, quasi servi et cultores Dei patientiam quam magisteriis caelestibus discimus obsequiis spiritalibus praebeamus.

If Carver's argument is inconclusive it is, at least, suggestive that Cyprian may have inspired Minucius Felix. The purpose of this study is to examine the text to see whether Carver's dating makes better sense of the purposes and proposals laid out in it.

Why did Minucius Felix write the *Octavius*? In the second century most of the Christian apologies had been addressed to the authorities in an attempt to seek a fair hearing and demonstrate the injustice of persecuting Christians; but that is not the purpose of this book. Although persecution of believers is referred to in the present tense, the passages are amongst the closest of all to Tertullian.⁶ The author is relying on past accounts rather than contemporary reports. Furthermore, the work is set in the yesteryears when Octavius, who has now 'departed', was a young man with small children. In chapter 28,

⁶ 'How fair a spectacle for God to see, when a Christian comes face to face with pain, stands matched with threats and punishments and tortures, confronts with a smile the din of death and the hideous executioner, rises to the full height of his liberty in the face of kings and princes, and yields to God alone, whose he is, as with victorious triumph he defies the judge who passed sentence on him' (37.1); cf. *Apologeticum* 50.1-9. All quotations are from T.R. Glover and G.H. Rendall, *Tertullian: Apology, De Spectaculis. Minucius Felix: Octavius* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

Minucius Felix remembers with remorse how he and Octavius used to defend all kinds of criminals at the bar, yet wholeheartedly sympathised with the torture and execution of Christians about whom, at that time, they knew very little. Clearly, many years have elapsed since then. Still, as we shall see, the book is very strongly against the Roman Empire. This fits in well with dating the book at least in the 260s. By the end of the Decian and Valentian persecutions the Roman-Christian confrontation was undeniable and, as Frend concludes, 'by 257... the antithesis "Roman" and "Christian" was recognized on both sides'.⁷ When Gallienus issued his edict of toleration, which Marta Sordi interprets as the first, begrudging, official recognition of Christianity, it would have raised the hope of a new peace and encouraged the church to readdress itself to the pagan world with higher expectations.⁸ In such a context the *Octavius* can be read as an attempt to make the transition intellectually and offer a new guiding philosophy for the world to follow.

The general approach taken by the book is standard fare in early Christian apology. Caecilius is made to argue that the Romans have grown great because they adopted the traditional gods of the nations and heeded the auguries. The Christians, on the other hand, are a gang of irreligious, poverty-stricken illiterates, incestuous, lust-filled baby-eaters, worshipping ridiculous and obscene objects, threatening the pagan world with fire, and deluding themselves with the hope of resurrection and eternal life while despising all social contact and public office. This is close enough to the kind of allegations that other apologists address for us to assume that they were fairly common arguments, or had been in previous years. Octavius' reply is based on four main arguments: (1) The poor can be just as wise, if not wiser than the rich (16.5-6); (2) To know yourself you must know God who is one, as all pagans really agree although their idols and religious rites confuse the issue (17-24); (3) Far from giving Rome its success, both pagan religion and the Roman state are corrupt and demon-led (25-27); (4) It is illogical to condemn without prior judgment, and when the common slanders and criticisms against Christians are examined one by one it is Christianity that emerges as the morally superior belief (28-38). His aim is clear:

⁷ W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (London: DLT, 1984), 326.

⁸ Marta Sordi, *The Christians and the Roman Empire* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), 116-18. She would not, however, agree with this dating of the *Octavius*.

To end the trouble I will refute and disprove his inconsistent arguments by proving and establishing a single truth; setting him free from all further occasion for doubt and wandering (16.4).

But what is the single truth which Octavius sets out to establish? The 'single truth', in fact, turns out to be two-fold. Monotheism and the belief in the ethical supremacy of Christianity are the pillars on which the work is built, and it is this austere limitation that gives the book its distinctive style and unique place. He readily plunders Cicero, Seneca, Lucretius, Virgil and Ovid, among others, in his search for proof that monotheism offers a respectable and logical world-view, one which had been in the minds of nearly all the great thinkers of the past, although in various guises. That this is essential to his methods is clear from his self-congratulatory verdict on Octavius' technique:

I was lost in admiration at the way in which by argument and illustration and quotation of authorities he had handled subjects easier to feel than express, and by the way in which he had disarmed ill-will by the very weapons which the philosophers use for their attack, and had set forth the truth in a guise at once so easy and so attractive (39).

His moralism furnishes him with his famous conclusion, the resounding phrase: 'We do not preach great things, but we live them; our boast is that we have won what they with the utmost strain have sought, yet could not find' (38.6). Clothed in their philosopher's robes, the pagan teachers preached high ideals but did not live up to them. The life of the Christians rests on moral standards that contrast sharply with the Roman way of life because 'we, whose values rest on morals and on modesty, have good reason to abstain from the vicious delights of your processions and spectacles' (37.11). Minucius Felix's moralism is all-pervading to an extent that Tertullian's is not. A good example is *Apologeticum* 14.2-7 where Tertullian remembers with withering scorn some of the outrageous humiliations that befell the gods in mythology, and he concludes that the gods are mocked more by the pagans than by Christians. In the parallel passage, *Octavius* 24.1-7, Minucius Felix relates the same examples but takes a different line, suggesting that such unfavourable portrayal of the gods is one of the reasons why pagan society is immoral. Tertullian's is the more incisive and logical

conclusion, but Minucius has borrowed the argument and stretched it to fit around his central theme of moral superiority.

High ethical ideals were not peculiar to the Christians. The higher pagan writers, notably Cicero, aspired to them also.⁹ Celsus actually accused the Christians of lack of originality in morals.¹⁰ However, the disasters and chaos that began to afflict the Roman Empire after the accession of Marcus Aurelius could be interpreted by Christian apologists as proof that the pagan world was incapable of living up to its ideals. Minucius excels in showing the contradictions between pagan theory and practice. For example, in his condemnation of theatre and games (37.12) he finishes with a superb final thrust: 'In the arena you clamour for the bloodshed for which upon the stage you weep.' Octavius' opponent admits to a general increase in corruption, although, of course, he holds the Christians to be partly responsible for it. From Marcus Aurelius' reign on, the *Pax Romana* began to come to an end and be succeeded by 'the age of barbarian invasions, bloody civil wars, recurrent epidemics, galloping inflation and extreme personal insecurity'.¹¹ The days when a Christian author like Irenaeus could praise the *Pax Romana* were long gone. Cyprian moaned:

The farmers are vanishing from the countryside, commerce from the sea, soldiers from the camps: all honesty in business, all justice in the courts, all solidarity in friendship, all skill in the arts, all standards in morals – all disappearing.¹²

To educated pagans, Minucius Felix held up Christian morals not as a rebuke, but as a practical reality lived by Christians. Christianity is seen as 'ethics put into practice' for all classes.¹³ It is an alternative popular lifestyle that could readily be adopted across the Roman Empire. The moral high ground was the essential platform from which he launched his attack on the Roman pagan world. Nowhere is this clearer than in his dramatic denial of the great Roman past.

⁹ John Whittaker, 'Christianity and Morality in the Roman Empire', *Vigiliae Christianae* 33 (1979), 209-25. This is in reply to W.C. Van Unnik, 'Die motivierung der Feindesliebe in Lukas VI:32-35', *NovT* 8 (1966), 284-300.

¹⁰ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.A.

¹¹ E.R. Dodds, *Pagans and Christians in an Age of Anxiety* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 3.

¹² *Ad Demetrianum* 3.

¹³ Johannes Quasten, *Patrology, Vol. II: The Ante-Nicene Literature after Irenaeus* (Utrecht: Spectrum, 1953), 159.

The relationship between Christians and the Roman Empire had been a delicate one from apostolic days, but it is possible to see a hardening of attitudes in the *Octavius*. None of the second- or third-century apologists are sympathetic to the Roman Empire. Elaine Pagels comments that they 'attack the whole basis of Roman Imperial power, denouncing its divine patrons as demons, and its rulers... as unwitting agents of demonic tyranny'.¹⁴ But of all the apologists it is Minucius Felix who is the most critical. Pagels observes that 'following Tertullian, (he) offers his own hostile sketch of Roman history'.¹⁵ In fact, she undersells her case. Despite his erudite charm, Minucius Felix is the most hostile of them all. It was common to argue that Rome had grown great because of its religion. Cicero had argued that Rome won its glory because of its 'pietate et religione'.¹⁶ Tertullian had observed that the incorporation of the gods is no different than any other plunder, and, therefore, not a pious act in any sense of the word. Minucius Felix, however, is not content to argue on strictly religious grounds, and takes moral issue with the very patterns of conquest that brought Rome into existence and established its Empire. Rome was born in crime and injustice:

All the same, you say, this so-called superstition gave world-empire to the Romans, increased and established it, for their strength lay not so much in valour as in religion and piety. Say you the noble and majestic fabric of Roman justice drew its auspices from the cradle of infant empire! Yet were they not in origin a collection of criminals? Did they not grow by the iron terror of their own savagery? The *plebs* first congregated in a city of refuge; thither had flocked ruffians, criminals, profligates, assassins and traitors; and Romulus himself, to secure criminal pre-eminence in office and rule, murdered his own brother... Was there ever procedure more irreligious, more outrageous, more cynical in its avowal of crime? Thenceforward it becomes the practice of all succeeding kings and leaders to dispossess neighbours of their territory, to overthrow adjoining states with their temples and their altars,

¹⁴ Elaine Pagels, 'Christian Apologists and "The Fall of the Angels": An Attack on Roman Imperial Power?', *HTR* 78 (1985), 303.

¹⁵ Pagels, 'Christian Apologists', 313. Tertullian can be rather ambiguous about the Roman Empire. See T.D. Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971), 219.

¹⁶ *De Har. Resp.* 9.18.

to drive them into captivity, to wax fat on losses inflicted, and crimes committed (25.1-4).

Minucius claims that the Romans have, at best, abused their trust, at worst usurped it altogether. The Roman Empire is not just religiously sick, but morally and historically sick, its present malaise being no more than the malaise of its gods and its past. Not only do Romans fail to live great lives, they are unable to live great lives because their squalid history is a negation of everything that is great, for 'all that the Romans hold, occupy and possess is the spoil of outrage; their temples are all of loot, drawn from the ruin of cities, the plunder of gods, and the slaughter of priests' (25.5).

This dismissal of Rome's glory makes more sense if we follow the opinion of the majority of commentators that the book was written in North Africa. Although Rome is the literary setting of the dialogue, there are some allusions which indicate its origin as Carthage or Cirta.¹⁷ Quispel finds evidence of North African Latin in the language of the book.¹⁸ He also finds echoes of a Jewish source linking the book with the possible Jewish character of Carthaginian Christianity.¹⁹ Caecilius talks of the Romans who 'lord it over you' (5.12), suggesting that his opponents are non-Romans. The discovery of inscriptions to a Caecilius Natalis of Cirta has excited some commentators.²⁰ Friend believes that the roots of anti-Roman feeling in North Africa probably went back to Tertullian's day when an imperial policy of cultural standardisation in North Africa began to lead to resentment.²¹ Anti-Roman sentiments were inflamed after AD 238 when the movement to overthrow the emperor Maximinus began in North Africa where his agent had gone

17 Juba, King of Mauretania (21.9), Julius Caesar crossing to Africa (26.4), the human sacrifices to Saturn (30.3), and the identification of the Roman god Juno with Poena. Fronto is referred to as 'cirtensis noster' (9.6).

18 Quispel, 'African Christianity before Minucius Felix and Tertullian', 292.

19 Gilles Quispel, 'A Jewish Source of Minucius Felix', *Vigiliae Christianae* 3 (1949), 113-22. W.H.C. Friend, *The Donatist Church: A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1952), 78-84 and 'The Seniores Laici and the Origins of the Church in North Africa', *JTS* 12 (1961), 280-84, has argued strongly for the Jewish background of the North African church, but Barnes, *Tertullian*, 273-75 disagrees.

20 *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* VIII:6996, 7094-8. *Prosopographia Imperii Romanarum* C 65. Sage, *Cyprian*, 72.

21 W.H.C. Friend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1965), 332; *The Donatist Church*, 106; *The Rise of Christianity*, 289-90. That the romanisation of the Punic gods caused resentment, as Friend argues, is challenged by T.D. Barnes, 'The Goddess Caelestis in the *Historia Augusta*', *JTS* 21 (1970), 96-101.

to excessive lengths in raising taxes.²² Although Gordianus was to prove successful in his bid for the Empire, before his final victory the *III Augustus* Legion led by the legate Capellianus re-took Carthage with devastating consequences. After Gordianus' accession, the Legion was disbanded in reprisal and the citizens made responsible for their own security, leaving North Africa insufficiently protected against barbarian invasions. These events may well have laid the foundations for the later Donatist schism.²³ Eberhard Heck raises the hypothesis that Minucius was in the first wave of those appealing for a Christian and autonomous North Africa.²⁴ Although the *Octavius* fits well into such a scenario, there is no evidence that Minucius Felix was seeking an autonomous Africa.²⁵ His work is religious, not political. The conclusion we can draw from his anti-Roman stance is that it points to a later North African context, and supports Carver's thesis that the work drew upon Cyprian.

If we date the book after the edict of Gallienus we might well expect to observe a more self-confident approach towards the pagan culture than was shown by Tertullian. This is indeed what we see. The book seeks to cut the ground from under the feet of the educated pagan such as Caecilius and present a better way of living; not just a sectarian *devotio*, but a philosophy which can heal the decadent sores of a sick society with its simplicity, purity and practicality. To present his alternative society Minucius needs to take on board pagan philosophy in a way that would have been anathema to Tertullian, who came to see no possible compromise between Athens and Jerusalem.²⁶ While all educated Christians had studied philosophy, they did not react to it in the same way.²⁷ Minucius Felix takes the inclusive approach, sometimes even waxing eloquent. He goes so far as to claim that Plato's

22 Marcel Bénabou, *La Résistance Africaine à la Romanisation* (Paris: François Maspero, 1976), 206.

23 Jean-Paul Brisson, *Autonomisme et Christianisme dans l'Afrique Romaine de Septime Sévère à l'Invasion Vandale* (Paris: Editions E. de Boccard, 1958), 30.

24 Eberhard Heck, 'Minucius Felix Und Der Römische Staat. Ein Hinweis Zum 25. Kapitel des *Octavius*', *Vigiliae Christianae* 38 (1984), 157-58.

25 Vecchiotti suggests that Minucius was against paganism, not Rome: Icilio Vecchiotti, *La Filosofia Politica di Minucio Felice: Um Altro Colpo di Sonda Nella Storia del Cristianesimo Primitivo* (Urbino: Argalia, 1973), esp. 171-72, 224. Certainly Minucius does not propose the end of the Empire, but he is still more critical of Rome than Vecchiotti admits.

26 There is some discussion concerning Tertullian's attitude to classical learning. See Robert Dick Sider, *Ancient Rhetoric and the Art of Tertullian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), *passim*.

27 C.J. De Vogel, 'Platonism and Christianity: A Mere Antagonism or a Profound Common Ground?', *Vigiliae Christianae* 39 (1985), 19.

discourse about God would be 'quite divine, were it not sometimes sullied by the intrusion of political bias' (9.14).²⁸ In contrast to his dismissive attitude towards Rome's political and religious history, he tries to incorporate its intellectual past into his blueprint for a Christian future. In his eagerness to link the most noble pagan thought with monotheism he comes to the naively optimistic conclusion that:

I have now cited the opinions of almost all philosophers of any marked distinction, all designating God as one, though under great variety of names, so that one might suppose, either that Christians of today are philosophers, or that philosophers of old were already Christians (20.1).²⁹

Does the book present us with a picture of the church circa 260? Alas, here we are hampered by both our lack of knowledge of church life in this period and by Minucius' own silence on the matter. He does talk of Christian fellowship in glowing terms (31.8), but does not expand on what Christians do. There is no exposition of the great things that Christians perform: no common chest, no caring for the sick and needy, no ransoming of prisoners. Lactantius and Jerome inform us that he was a prominent lawyer. That may have been so, but was he a prominent Christian? Eusebius does not mention him, so presumably he did not know of the *Octavius*. However, he has a sparse knowledge of Latin authors generally and only appears to be familiar with the *Apologeticum* of Tertullian, so we should not be too surprised that he has not met the *Octavius*. Baehrens argued that Minucius was a heretic who avoided doctrinal statements for fear of giving himself away, but, as Aldama reasons, the heretics of the time were hardly so reticent in the publication of their beliefs as to try to hide their heterodoxy.³⁰

28 Cf. Tertullian's more ambiguous treatment of Plato: *Apol.* 22.1-2; 24.3; 46.15; 46.9.

29 Cf. *Apol.* 46.1-6.

30 W.A. Baehrens, 'Literarhistorische Beiträge, III: Zu Minucius Felix', *Hermes* 50 (1915), 456-63; Ana M.a. Aldama, 'El *Octavius* de Minucius Felix. Puntos Discutidos', *Estudios Clasicos* 29 (1987), 60. Gilles Quispel also doubts the orthodoxy of Minucius Felix and links him with views that predominated in North Africa before the introduction of Catholic Christianity, namely the annihilation of the soul after death pending the resurrection, and a primitive modalism; see Gilles Quispel, 'African Christianity before Tertullian', in W. Den Boer, P.G. Van der Nat and C.M.J. Sicking (eds.), *Romanitas et Christianitas: Studia Iano Henrico Wazink* (Amsterdam: North Holland Publishing Company, 1973), 275-79. But Minucius is replying to the criticism that the body cannot rise (11.7), so his use of the term 'renasci' in 11.2 does not refer to the soul but to the body which is annihilated after death. Furthermore, the absence of any Logos doctrine does not prove the presence of modalism.

Minucius' doctrinal comments are so sparse that we should hesitate before finding any strong indication of unorthodoxy in them. Yet, if the *Octavius* was written to convert Romans to the church it is strange that Minucius says nothing about church life. Is there need of a church at all? It is possible that Minucius Felix might not have been baptised himself, because as a practising lawyer he would have had to be involved in some unsavoury activities in the law-courts.³¹ On the other hand, he admits to rejection of public office (36.6), comments that Christians do not eat anything with blood in it (30.6), and supports 'single marriage' (31.5) which may mean a ban on the remarriage of widows.³² What little evidence there is suggests an adherence to a mainstream Christianity, but whether the author of the *Octavius* was a member of the church or whether he was a convinced and converted fellow traveller must remain unproved. He is clearly delighted by his friend's decision to adopt the 'sect' as his own, but his vision goes beyond that of a growing church to a converted Empire in which Christianity will have replaced paganism as the basis for religious and ethical life. Such a view would be consistent with a time when Christians saw themselves less as a beleaguered sect and more as a recognised religion within the Empire.

In conclusion, it can be affirmed that when given a North African setting after the rescript of Gallienus, the *Octavius* works well. Minucius Felix accepts Christianity's new status and sets out to raise the stakes, arguing for its adoption as the official *religio*. His boldness is all the more impressive because, in a sense, he was swimming against the tide. Paganism was changing, drifting not to monotheism, but rather towards a syncretism which united the Roman gods with the regional deities.³³ His method is, firstly, to stress monotheism, implying that the new syncretism is intellectually untenable. Whereas in the second century the pagan doctor Galen had portrayed Christians

31 Clarke, *Octavius*, 211-12, n. 111, 112.

32 On magisterial position see Clarke, *Octavius*, 211, n. 111 who argues that there was no hard and fast general rule against accepting such posts. On avoiding eating food with blood in it, see Quispel, 'African Christianity before Minucius Felix and Tertullian', 278-88 who claims that this was a characteristic of North African Christianity. On second marriage, see Judith Evans Grubbs, "'Pagan" and "Christian" Marriage: The State of the Question', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2 (1994), 361-412.

33 See Robin Lane Fox, 'Pagan Cults', in *Pagans and Christians* (London: Penguin, 1986), 64-101; Ramsay McMullen, 'The Vitality of Paganism', in *Paganism in the Roman Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 62-73; J. Rives, *Religion and Authority in Roman Carthage from Augustus to Constantine* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995); J.A. North, 'Conservation and Change in Roman Religion', *Papers of the British School at Rome* 44, n.s. 30 (1976), 1-12.

as an authoritarian group whose lack of logic was substituted by a believe-or-be-damned fundamentalism, Minucius now shows that Christianity agrees with the sweetest of reason.³⁴ Secondly, he seeks to discredit the assimilation of Roman gods. He taps into the rising anti-Roman feeling not with the intent of declaring Christian autonomy in Roman Africa, but with the aim of showing his audience that their official religion has led them nowhere except into decadence. Thirdly, by basing the book around outdated scurrilous moral slanders such as that made by Fronto in the second century, Minucius Felix draws his opponent into the quick-sands of moral judgment. Unable to condemn Christians, Caecilius sinks under the weight of his own moral failure. By accepting the date of the book as post-Cyprian, the *Octavius* provides strong evidence that as early as the 260s the Latin church had begun to see itself no longer as a sectarian group but as a respectable religion and a better guardian of public morals than Roman religion. It was time for the pagan religions to move over and let Christianity in. Given the strength of the opposition, that seems a hopelessly ambitious goal to have aimed for. Within fifty years, however, it had come about, but it took the conversion of an Emperor to make it happen.

³⁴ For Galen on Christianity, see R. Walzer, *Galen on Jews and Christians* (London: Oxford University Press, 1949), 13-16.