

Zitierhinweis

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Mark Letteney: The Christianization of Knowledge in Late Antiquity

The Christianization of Knowledge in Late Antiquity is a timely, thought-provoking book that centres the question of what constitutes a valid argument at the heart of the cultural shifts of the fourth-century empire. The work identifies a turning point in the history of forms of knowledge production in the time between Constantine's Council of Nicaea and the Theodosian Age. Part One opens with an investigation of the different conceptions of truth of second-century apologists. Letteney shows their diverse approaches to textual authority (including outright disbelief in the written medium) and argues that the Nicene reckoning with the hermeneutical ambiguity of Scripture fomented a new stage of systematic elaboration of authoritative creed-making. The victorious formula emerging from the debates presented a tripartite argumentative structure based on the principles of 'aggregation' (of scripture and past theological statements), 'distillation' (of truth), and 'promulgation'. The key feature of this structure is that it appears to conceive of truth as simultaneously pre-textual *and* grounded on textual synthesis (80). Letteney goes on to map this 'aggregation - distillation - promulgation' pattern onto a variety of fourth-century writings seeking to authoritatively organise culture from outside the world of Christian disputes, from the *Codex Theodosianus*, erudite compilations, medicine, and historiography, up to the Palestinian Talmud.

The second part of the book focuses on material forms. Letteney argues here that the above-described shifts in knowledge production shaped new readers, which determined the elaboration of new textual forms. He envisions the code(x) as the ideal space of support for this cultural reimagining of the idea of truth and argues that the migration of Christian textual notations onto pagan texts shows manuscripts to be equally witnesses to and channels of the cultural dynamics outlined in Part One. I will leave specialists of material culture to assess the book's latter half and will focus on its hefty first part. Letteney persuasively unpacks the cultural interconnectedness marking Theodosian scholarship and produces citations that show remarkable affinities in argument. Readers might wish at times more engagement with the original Greek and Latin, as well as a clearer statement as to how capacious the fleetingly defined concepts of 'aggregation', 'distillation', and 'promulgation' can be before they dissolve into something else (an issue to which Letteney himself seems alive, as he acknowledges that his book's 'comparative methodology ... is particularly prone to muddy waters in which the distinctiveness of corpora dissolve into a puddle of similarity', 17). Overall, however, Letteney beautifully captures the pervasiveness of methodological concerns rooted in the perceived tension between the (un)reliability of textual authority vis-à-vis the necessity of issuing clear-cut guidelines. I was especially taken by the contrasting analysis of the work of the early apologists (with notably

excellent use of the *Gospel of Truth*), illustrating various degrees of scepticism towards scriptural interpretation and textual authority. The centring of Athanasius as pivotal to the elaboration of a new method is provocative and felicitous, and one is only left hoping it had been the subject of a more extensive treatment. Letteney also merits praise for the proposal of reading the *Codex Theodosianus* as expressing new conceptions of how the promulgation of normative praxis must be simultaneously grounded on a pretextual (ethical?) truth and mastery of the written tradition.

The key criticism this book must face is whether its focus on 'Christianization' is somewhat misplaced. Letteney himself locates his turning points in the advent of Constantine and Theodosius; he discusses Constantine's concern with state unity (67) and the epistemic concerns underpinning the traditional imperial commitment to maintaining the *pax deorum* (69). The book thus clearly addresses the ultimately Foucauldian question of how power's disciplining of knowledge relies on religion, which it transforms in the process. We are presented with 'Christian ways of knowing' (228), but there is nothing intrinsically Christian in the way bishops - competitive leaders in conversation with power and all too aware of the cultural demands of their surroundings - sought to exercise control over, and via, doctrine. The blurb asserts that 'Christianity inflected the production of truth far beyond the domain of theology' so that its intellectual tools 'shed their theological baggage' to influence culture more widely. It is, possibly, the other way around: authorities (including the ecclesiastical ones) faced a destabilising challenge - doctrinal controversies - and responded by drawing on, and indeed refining and innovating upon, a set of intellectual tools that pre-existed not just these disputes but Christianity itself.

By centring Christianity as the (exceptional) agent, rather than a field, of innovation, we miss understanding that what this book describes ultimately lies within the continuous history of Rome's efforts at 'ordering knowledge' (König and Whitmarsh 2007) across its cosmopolitan landscape. The Principate was home to groups of self-confessed truth-holders (e.g. the Hellenistic philosophical schools) competitively laying claims to intellectual primacy: the quest for a universal truth is a defining trait of post-Hellenistic philosophies (Boys-Stones 2001) and owes much to Scepticism's radical re-assessment of what constitutes proof (Striker 1990, 'The Problem of the Criterion'). If the attitudes to truth showcased by second-century apologists are different, it is because they all tapped into different traditions with different conceptions of textual authority. Ammianus' and the *Historia Augusta* 's objections to 'aggregative' arguments might be, as Letteney contends, the expression of a traditionalist rejection of contemporary cultural trends (113-19), but they still presuppose a historiographical tradition that had long interrogated the issue of what constitutes evidence. An analogous remark applies to Letteney's claim that the Palestinian Talmud reflects, in its Theodosian layer, dynamics of the Christianisation of knowledge. His efforts to contextualise the *stam* -layer are original and intriguing, although hard to scrutinise in their validity (note: this is not an objection but simply a

remark that Letteney's reading unfolds in a mere eight pages and is grounded on two textual excerpts). The conclusion that the argumentative specificities of this layer reflect Christianisation, however, strikes as re-descriptive. It reframes the plain fact that the rabbis happened to exist within a socio-political environment that was concomitantly striving to control intellectual authority and Christian doctrine.

The book also invites questions about where science ends and rhetoric begins. It presents itself from the outset as 'a study of what counts as a fact' (3), negotiating continuity with Latour's sociology of science and his appraisal of the laboratory as 'a political space' (4). Latour himself, however, issued a paper ('Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?' 2004) criticising the reduction of science to its human factor. The claim that a study of theological 'laboratories' might compare to that of, say, the testing of the bovine anthrax vaccine (4) invites questioning: theology, for once, cannot be grounded on external proof (cf. J. Barnes 1997, 'Reason and Faith'). Athanasius could not inject his creed into someone's arm to see if the body reacted as planned, and the chicken-and-egg nature of his methodology (truth is pretextual but must be found in text) demonstrates that he came to the discussion pre-apprehended. His undeniable investment in the method of arguing channelled a concern with persuading; when speaking of demonstration and proof, he drew on aspirational language.

Setting these remarks aside, Mark Letteney's monograph remains a trail-blazing contribution to the study of the relationship between politics and culture in the later Roman world. Letteney should be congratulated for how compellingly he problematises assumptions related to the appeal of scriptural interpretation in pre-Nicene theological debates, casts light on the highly interconnected world of Theodosian culture, and proves validity of argument to have been a central concern of late antique authorities.