

1 Modes of Knowing and Ordering Knowledge in Early Christianity

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For nothing is / sweeter than to know everything.

οὐδέν <έστι> γάρ / γλυκύτερον ἢ πάντ' εἶδέναι.

Menander, *Epit.* fr. 2

But since 'it is sweet to know everything', for this reason we, quite sensibly, also devote ourselves to studying the opinions of the Greeks which they have collected on each of the subjects.

Ἐπειδὴ δέ ἐστι γλυκὺ τὸ πάντα εἶδέναι, ταύτη τοι, καὶ μάλα ἐμφρόνως, καὶ τὰς τῶν Ἑλλήνων πολυπραγμονοῦμεν δόξας, ἃς δὴ καὶ ἐφ' ἑκάστῳ συνειλόχασι τῶν πραγμάτων.

Cyril of Alexandria, *Against Julian* 7.17

Between the second and the seventh century CE, Christianity expanded throughout the Mediterranean basin and beyond. Throughout this expansion, Christian thinkers were imbued with the intellectual currents of the Greco-Roman world even as they at times critiqued them. Believing that Christian faith pressed them to reinterpret history and divide true from false wisdom in other philosophical and religious traditions, Christians encompassed, reorganised, and reoriented existing bodies of knowledge and conceptions of the process of knowing. Appropriating earlier traditions, they integrated bodily practices, ethics, and political identities with conceptions of reasoning informed by Christian theological claims. Christian perspectives thus provided a basis for rethinking earlier notions while classical and Jewish ideas and practices nurtured and shaped Christian intellectual traditions at the very deepest levels. In this process, Christians developed cultures of interpretation and argument, defining what it meant for them to be a textually oriented religious community

The editors thank Sarah Gador-Whyte, Michael Hanaghan, Dawn LaValle Norman, and Jonathan Zecher for stimulating discussion and debate throughout the project that contributed significantly to the arguments presented in this introduction. Their feedback on contributors' chapters also helped to sharpen and bring coherence to the overall volume. We also thank Jeremiah Coogan for his perceptive comments.

within the Roman empire, and thereby laid an intellectual foundation that would be built upon and modified in a variety of different later contexts, stretching from deep within the continents of Africa and Asia to the furthest limits of Europe.¹

Questions of epistemology – what can be known? how can things be known? who has access to truth? is access to truth possible for sinful humans? – were highly contested in this formative period. Texts such as Matthew’s ‘no one has known the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son has revealed him’ (Matt 11:27) placed Christ the revealer of truth at the centre of Christian intellectual endeavour and forced Christian thinkers into multifaceted, creative, generative, sometimes tense, engagements with established epistemic schemes and standards of classical philosophy, grammar, rhetoric, and medicine. Contests over theories of knowledge were, in turn, shaped by the institutional and economic realities of empire, educational establishments, and emerging Christian ecclesial communities, which together gave expression to Christian identity and transmitted it from one generation to the next. In the context of these institutional structures, Christian practices of pilgrimage, liturgy, asceticism, art and architecture, and use of sacred objects such as relics and holy books enacted and formed epistemic commitments by ordering the entire person towards the goal of becoming godlike (*theosis*).

Central to this intellectual and religious project was the notion of ‘order’, itself adapted from Greco-Roman philosophical and rhetorical sources. By following the divine Logos made known in Jesus Christ, Christians believed themselves to be restored to the original lost ‘order’, which enabled them to recognise and evaluate all other claims to knowledge. This bold stance is already staked out in the second-century *Oration to the Greeks* composed by Tatian the Assyrian² and would eventually result in ambitious encyclopaedic efforts such as Isidore of Seville’s massive *Etymologiae*, one of the most influential works of the Middle Ages which attempted to ‘order’ all human knowledge. Similarly, the adaptation by early Christians of Platonic traditions of the ‘ascent’ of the intellect towards the intelligible world shaped ways of conceiving the activity of knowing and contemplation that would persist long into the modern period. The development of Christian thought and practice moulded patterns of ordering knowledge and modes of knowing which produced a distinct way of being in the world and flowed over into the formation of Christian communities.

¹ For Brian Stock’s notion of a ‘textual community’, picked up by other contributors to this volume, see Stock 1983. See also caveats and discussion in Heath 2018.

² See Crawford 2015c.

Many lines of investigation pursued in this volume were first traversed in recent classical scholarship, which has explored how imperial power structures and communal practices affected the ordering of knowledge in the ancient world, but without considering Christian material in any great detail. Such scholarship has, for example, considered how the Roman empire's universalising grasp is interrelated with the development of encyclopaedic tendencies in literature. Michel Foucault's insight that each society nurtures its own 'mode' or 'modes of knowing' – those discourses taken to describe that which is true, mechanisms for distinguishing truth from falsehood, institutional structures that identify particular persons as able to speak truth – was a fundamental influence for this tradition of scholarship.³ More recently, scholarship on late antiquity has demonstrated the fruitfulness of such questions for this later period while leaving scope for further work on the entanglement of Christian theology in epistemological schemes. For example, Michael Chin and Moulie Vidas have drawn together a collection of studies, amply demonstrating that the manner in which late antique people went about knowing is bound up with questions of how they negotiated and constructed structures of power, social relationships, and intersecting imaginative universes.⁴

Although Foucault is thus a point of departure here, we also hope to move debate in new directions in our attitude towards theological discourse and in our methodological variety. In common with Foucault and other cultural historians, we maintain that early Christian ideas were deeply embedded in the cultural, political, and social worlds of the Roman empire in which they evolved. A number of contributions to the volume engage Pierre Hadot's notion of philosophy as a 'way of life', which foregrounds the ethical consequences of epistemological commitments and the ways in which thought, instantiated in forms of practice and power relations, helps to shape action.⁵ But we also claim that such ideas cannot be reduced to matrices of cultural and social power, since traditions of rationality have an internal dynamic force that impels them forward with wider historical consequences beyond the strictly epistemological. We are therefore convinced that understanding early Christian thought (in all its diversity and fuzzy boundaries) requires careful attention to its internal logics and theological assumptions, which in turn inflect the wider cultural and intellectual world of the empire and changing political realities of the period. Despite, and partly because of, the endless ways in which

³ Foucault 1966/1973, 1969/1972; König and Whitmarsh 2007b.

⁴ Chin and Vidas 2015a. ⁵ Hadot 1995b, 1995a/2002.

Christians participate in the wider epistemological landscape, Christianity remains identifiable as a distinct set of more and less coherent traditions: sometimes by the expression of unique Christian ideas; sometimes by the rejection of other views or practices as inconsistent with Christian faith; at other times by distinct ways of assembling or orienting those discourses, institutions, and practices that are shared with non-Christians of the period. Thus, we seek to understand how Christians attempted to order knowledge and knowing in the multiple contexts of Roman imperial culture (and ideology), Christian and non-Christian institutions and social practices and the particular *foci* of Christian beliefs about the world, its history and purpose.

This volume is intended to provide points of departure across a wide field for those who want to take forward this opportunity. The collection of case studies could never be exhaustive, and we are aware of several gaps and areas – thematic and linguistic – that could easily have been given greater prominence.⁶ We hope, though, that others may find approaches and guiding questions in the individual essays productive and may be motivated to contribute to an ongoing discussion from the perspective of other scholarly specialisms.

Our original project took as its title and focus the twin themes ‘modes of knowing’ and ‘ordering knowledge’. We understand these heuristic categories to mark out, first, the means by which knowledge is accessed or attained and, second, how one handles, processes, or arranges the knowledge thus gained. Of course, these two often overlap, since the act of knowing is contingent upon both the knowing subject and the known object. Consequently, the way in which knowledge is ordered inevitably shapes how subsequent knowers engage with it, since it delimits the modes of knowing able to be employed, opening up certain possibilities and discouraging others or even making them impossible. Nevertheless, we have found that distinguishing these two themes is useful insofar as they bring into sharper focus different aspects of the epistemological process and allow closer scrutiny of each in turn. Furthermore, our aim was to examine these twin themes across the three domains of (a) discourses, (b) the institutions that perpetuated discourses over time, and (c) the material forms that affect discourses and institutional practices. These domains likewise overlap and readers will find that frequently two or even all three are in play in the treatment of a given topic.

⁶ Some of these gaps were the consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic, and we thank all who worked on the project in these difficult circumstances.

Although this volume is not structured around these two themes or the three domains of investigation, the collection of case studies our authors have contributed addresses all these issues at one point or another. What follows here is an attempt to draw out common threads across the collection. By so doing, our intention is to provide an alternate ‘ordering’ scheme for this volume, to complement the roughly chronological sequence of the chapters. We provide two maps of the collection, first tracing the intersecting contours of modes of knowing and the ordering of knowledge, and then charting the connections between discourses, institutions, and materiality by drawing on theoretical approaches to structure and agency to connect these phenomena.

Modes of Knowing

The question of whether the five bodily senses provide sound and trustworthy knowledge or something less certain was a long-running topic of philosophical debate. These classical debates continued throughout late antiquity and were reshaped in light of Christian concerns. The capacities of the human body understood as ‘in Christ’ inspired the development of the notion of analogous ‘spiritual senses’ modelled on the five corporeal modes of sensation. Scholars have typically gone to Origen as the source of this idea, and, although his robust elaboration of it is justly famous, Jane Heath shows that Origen was building upon an even older tradition evident in Clement of Alexandria and reaching back all the way to the apostle Paul, which emphasised the transformation of the human person effected by the Christ-event. For these authors, sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch became evocative metaphors for describing the new epistemological capacities created by undergoing the waters of baptism, being united with Christ, and joining the Christian community established by him.

Divination – a well-established and theorised mode of knowing in antiquity – depended in large part on a distinction between attaining knowledge through discursive reason and gaining insight through intuition and the senses. It is thus an important case study for thinking through bodily cognition and the relation of the embodied knower to the wider order of the material cosmos. As Peter Struck notes, Iamblichus’ defence of theurgical practice against the criticisms of Porphyry was influential for later Neoplatonic philosophers and helped to establish liturgical practice as a way of knowing for Neoplatonists, as it would also be for Christians. Yet some forms of divination remained problematic for Platonists. Struck highlights

compelling parallels between Iamblichus' notion of 'divine divination' and the explication of biblical prophecy among Christian authors like Origen, who also were highly critical of the way in which traditional divinatory practices were implicated in matter, making them epistemologically insecure. It is possible that Iamblichus was responding to such criticisms by reshaping the classical notion of divination to avoid their bite. Iamblichus comes to regard divination as capable of revealing not mundane details, such as whom to marry or whether to engage in a business transaction, but the deepest truths of reality, in a manner akin to the Christian belief that the meaning of history is unveiled in the scriptures and the person of Jesus foretold by the prophets.

This notion of 'seeing through' textually configured material things to disclose reality fundamentally shapes early Christian modes of knowing. As in the case of the wider Platonic tradition, Christians closely associated sight and knowledge in their thinking about the transformed and embodied spiritual senses. For example, Robin Jensen explores how Christian theologians regarded vision not merely as a metaphor for a non-bodily mode of knowing but also as itself a means of gaining access to invisible and transcendent realities. If meditation on Christ's incarnation led to the belief that material reality has an intrinsic potential to become the bearer of divine presence and action, then this line of reflection could be extended to other material objects, which, Jensen argues, accords with the preference for scenes of biblical narrative in surviving Christian art from the period. It was not merely that images could teach for some audiences more effectively than extended discourse – although leaders like Augustine and Paulinus recognised that they could be just as pedagogically effective as words and texts, if not even more so. At a deeper level, images could disclose truth because material creation, understood in the light of Christian narratives, could be taken to provide access to divine reality. Such a view extended from nature to claims about the revelatory potential of cultural production. Matthew Crawford takes up such themes by analysing a specific image from late antique Christian art which had a long medieval afterlife. The so-called *tholos* image that accompanies many copies of the Eusebian Canon Tables has traditionally been understood as a depiction of Constantine's *aedicula* over Christ's tomb at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Crawford argues, on the contrary, that the image is designedly abstract and undefined in order to invite an imaginative response from the viewer. Eusebius' own corpus provides evidence of Christians beginning to use sacred architecture as a sort of cognitive machine or mode of knowing, which suggests that architectural images like the *tholos* page, when activated by a biblically

inspired *ekphrasis*, could similarly function in a symbolic and constructive fashion.

Such epistemological practices are congruent with the wider phenomenon of Christian worship becoming a key site for developing and inculcating early Christian modes of knowing. Johan Leemans examines surviving festal sermons to illustrate how preachers trained in Greek rhetoric drew upon the sacred scriptures as an authoritative archive to create an immersive world that drew the listener in and united past, present, and future in one overarching divine plan to redeem humanity. Moreover, even though we typically hear only the voice of the preacher in our surviving sources, there is compelling evidence that the sermon was, to some extent, a dialogical mode of knowing in which the preacher had to respond in the moment to his congregation's reaction. Brian Dunkle examines the hymns composed by Ambrose which construct a compelling world for the congregant through the use of evocative imagery. Ambrose's sermons presented biblical material in an 'abstract, narrative, and conceptual' manner, while his hymns repackaged the same content in terms of 'personal, concrete and actualising *exempla*', illustrating how multiple modes of knowing could be applied to the same stock of information to produce different effects. Dunkle follows John Henry Newman's development of Ambrose's epistemology to argue that the hymns were designed to effect the 'real assent' that could not be produced solely through the dialectic of a sermon. Sarah Gador-Whyte picks up similar themes in her study of hymns and homilies in sixth-century Byzantium. She broadens the scope to explore the liturgy as a whole, arguing that its various components provided participants with an all-embracing and truth-disclosing experience. This experience did not merely involve the discursive reason of the individual but aimed to produce an embodied, emotional reaction involving the whole person and the worshipping community. Gador-Whyte's analysis of the function of the hymns of Romanos and the homilies of Leontius suggests that lay communities in sixth-century Constantinople came to know what it meant in that time and place to be a Christian and were consciously and unconsciously formed, as individuals and coherent communities, in accordance with that ideal.

Ordering Knowledge

Because effective pedagogy depends upon some kind of intelligible curriculum, the classroom is a significant social location for ordering knowledge. Various ordering schemes were employed in ancient educational contexts,

and several of our contributors highlight ways in which these were adopted, adapted, and transformed by Christians for their own purposes. One of the most common Platonic schemes was the threefold division of philosophy into ethics, physics, and epoptics (theology or contemplation of divine mysteries).⁷ We see this scheme among Christian authors as early as Clement of Alexandria who, as Matyáš Havrda argues, used it to structure his own corpus. Given that Clement probably employed this division of topics in an ecclesially affiliated educational institution in Alexandria, Clement exemplifies the way existing epistemological schemes could be used for distinctly Christian ends.⁸ The most striking difference between Clement and his non-Christian philosophical peers is his claim that these branches of learning mapped onto Christian sacred texts which were henceforth to serve as the foundation of the curriculum. (On this point Philo of Alexandria serves as a partial precedent in his prioritisation of the Hebrew Bible.)

The tripartite Platonic division of philosophy would be picked up in the next generation by Origen, and we see it still exerting influence three centuries later in more elaborate schemes in Boethius and Cassiodorus, as explored by John Magee. Magee traces how Boethius' understanding of this ordering scheme developed over the course of his career, as well as how the differing institutional settings of Boethius and Cassiodorus resulted in altered curricula to meet the needs of their respective communities. Such transformations would eventually crystallise in the quadrivium and trivium comprising the seven liberal arts that became a staple of the epistemological landscape of the Middle Ages. Michael Champion probes similar questions in the Eastern traditions of philosophy and asceticism, exploring how epistemological assumptions shared by Neoplatonists and the sixth-century monk Dorotheus of Gaza are transformed in Dorotheus' case by working through consequences of taking humility as an epistemic virtue within ascetic education. Platonic ordering of philosophical knowledge would be taken up into the Byzantine tradition by commentators on both Aristotle and John of Damascus. Thus, through a variety of institutional settings over the entire span of time covered by our volume, we can observe both continuity and change in the epistemological regimes represented in our case studies, as educators reshaped received traditions to meet the needs of the moment and differing pedagogical contexts.

A key problem across this collection is how to conceptualise Christian epistemological schemes in relation to other modes of ordering knowledge.

⁷ Dillon 1996; Boys-Stones 2018. ⁸ van den Hoek 1997.

Different authors adopt diverse approaches, characterising Christian epistemology as the adoption of philosophical or Jewish categories or their appropriation and transformation for Christian purposes. While much is taken over especially from Platonism, sometimes no doubt largely unconsciously, new institutional contexts (for example asceticism, catechetical schools), a concern to induct a large group of people from differing social classes into Christian truth claims, and the need to interpret different and newly authoritative texts often put pressure on Christian thinkers from different traditions to adapt earlier schemes and reflect on their utility. For example, Scott Johnson examines one of our earliest surviving Syriac texts, Bardaisan's *Book of the Laws of the Countries*, and highlights its innovative juxtaposition of two established genres, the Platonic dialogue and the ethnographic catalogue. The latter was, of course, a classic form used by authors since Herodotus to order the world and render its diversity intelligible. Yet Bardaisan uniquely deployed this genre within an argument against determinism and in favour of the universalising belief that all humanity can be transformed by the Christian message, no matter where they were located or what ancestral customs they practised. The fact that Bardaisan was using these well-known genres of Greek literature while writing in the dialect of Aramaic spoken in Edessa is a further innovative aspect of his literary and, most likely, educational undertaking which has otherwise almost entirely perished. Much conceptual innovation in our period was achieved through translation of intellectual traditions into new linguistic categories, as Johnson's chapter makes plain.⁹

The reconfiguring of classical traditions is also apparent in David Runia's chapter on the *Placita* composed by the shadowy figure of Aëtius who, within the tripartite division of philosophy, focused in detail on physics, compiling the views of dozens of ancient philosophers on a wide range of questions related to the natural world. Aëtius' *vademecum* of philosophical opinions perhaps originally stemmed from an educational context, though we have no way of knowing its *Sitz im Leben* with certainty. Whatever the case, its reception history runs almost entirely through the hands of Christian authors who transformed its presentation of 'structured disorder' into a deconstructive argument against non-Christian philosophy itself. As this demonstrates, attempts at ordering knowledge in one context could be put to very different uses in the hands of later pedagogues with unforeseen intellectual commitments.

⁹ A parallel case is the translation of Aristotelian thought through the commentary tradition from Greek into Syriac and Arabic. See D'Ancona Costa 2002; Adamson, Baltussen, and Stone 2004; Sorabji 2004; Becker 2006; King 2010.

The development of new information technologies also enabled the formation of distinctive schemes for ordering knowledge. Drawing upon his extensive research on information technology in classical antiquity, Andrew Riggsby considers the innovative way tabular organisation was repurposed as a knowledge-ordering device by the Christian scholars Origen of Alexandria and Eusebius of Caesarea. While Origen's massive *Hexapla* is well known, Riggsby offers a new theory of its origins by positing that Origen was adapting and expanding an existing genre of bilingual texts used for language instruction which presented corresponding words in parallel columns, for example Latin to Greek, Greek to Coptic, and so on. Because these bilingual texts were used at a fairly rudimentary level of educational instruction, they do not appear in the elite discourses captured by surviving literary sources. Origen, however, recognised that presenting information in parallel columns could be further exploited, and he produced a text, or more accurately a collection of texts, that ordered multilingual knowledge on an unprecedented scale. Eusebius, Origen's enthusiastic follower, would later adapt this information technology yet again by combining it with numerical representation to elucidate the complex relationships of similarity and difference that exist within the church's four canonical gospels.¹⁰

Origen's *Hexapla* and Eusebius's Canon Tables are both examples of attempts to order knowledge that is distinctly Christian in content, focused on Christian sacred texts.¹¹ Other attempts at ordering knowledge by Christians were also driven by specifically Christian concerns, including the needs of specific audiences. Edwina Murphy's chapter provides one such case study, examining how Cyprian of Carthage distilled the knowledge of the Christian scriptures into a memorable format that could be readily employed for the purposes of catechetical instruction. The *testimonia* collections he produced utilised classical rhetorical insights about human memory, such as the use of keywords as ordering devices, but were aimed at producing a community transformed by its adherence to the distinct ethical precepts expressed in this body of texts.

Andrew Radde-Gallwitz shines a spotlight on another Christian genre with no clear parallel in the classical world, the conciliar creed. Radde-Gallwitz argues, first, that modern scholarly attempts at organising

¹⁰ Crawford 2019.

¹¹ Of course, Origen's *Hexapla* focused on the Hebrew scriptures and thus overlapped in terms of content with Jewish sacred texts. However, the existence of multiple Greek translations and their correspondence to the Hebrew version(s) seems to have been a problem felt acutely by Christians, though Rabbinic literature also demonstrates some concern with it.