Book Reviews

Letteney, Mark. 2023. *The Christianization of Knowledge in Late Antiquity: Intellectual and Material Transformations*. New York: Cambridge University Press. Pp. 290. ISBN 9781009363389, Hardback $110. ISBN 9781009363341, eBook Open Access.

It is fair to say that, as the title of his book suggests, Mark Letteney is concerned here with both the Christianization of Europe in Late Antiquity as well as with identifying new methods in the production of knowledge. Letteney, though, is concerned with how these two concepts relate to each other causally. His larger claim is that changes in the production of knowledge, both theoretically and materially, are inherently linked to the growing dominance of Christianized intellectual traditions in the Roman Empire of the 4th and 5th centuries CE. This is not strictly a theological argument, though the origins of Christian argumentation lie in resolving theological disputes; rather, Letteney makes the compelling claim that the "creation and implementation of a new way of making theological arguments in Late Antiquity" leads to a radical change in all domains of the Roman intellectual tradition (5).

The primary arena in which Letteney sees this transformation play out is in the argumentation of individual Christian thinkers, especially the exemplary character of Athanasius of Alexandria, who represent this larger trend in the transformation of knowledge (3). How individual Christians make theological arguments is revealing and Letteney's analysis is primarily inflected by Bruno Latour's reading of the laboratory of ideas.1 For Latour, in his study of Louis Pasteur in "Give Me a Laboratory and I Will Raise the World" (1983), the laboratory is a political space which, in addition to providing the results of scientific experimentation, must also cultivate the ideological requirements for the acceptance of those same results. For Letteney, the laboratory provides a metaphor for the politics of knowledge in that "laboratory results powerfully and fundamentally changed the society into which they were unleashed" (4). Drawing on Latour, Letteney explains that "the laboratory that I engage

1. Latour 1988 more fully develops both his concept of the laboratory as a political space and his actor-network theory, to which Letteney also turns.

here attempted to form a true micro-cosmos, distilling grand questions of divine ontology to propositional statements, debating those statements, and determining their proper resolution *in nuce*" (4). What Letteney will go on to outline in this book is not only the emergence of these new forms of argumentation, but also the social and intellectual changes that had to take place in the Roman (and Christian) world in order for them to take hold. This theological laboratory fostered the development of new ways of thinking in Late Antiquity and primed the social changes required for its wider reception and is fundamental to Letteney's method.

The book is divided into eight chapters split into two parts. In the introductory chapter, Letteney situates his analysis in two particular modes. The first studies the development of particular forms of argumentation leading up to, and emanating out from, the Council of Nicaea (325 CE). The second mode is the material development of new forms of text production. Here is the real insight of Letteney's approach, that the Christianization of Europe occurs not only in the migration of theological disputation into other modes of scholarly inquiry, but also in the changes in material culture that make this migration possible, such as the production of manuscripts in the form of the codex, the authoritative nature of codex manuscripts, and the function of the codex-as-object that "could heal the sick, drive away sin, invite Christ incarnate to an imperially sanctioned debate, and present the authority of the emperor at a distance" (144). In this way, Letteney does not only engage with the few explicit moments of methodological reflection in antiquity but also ties changes in the development of the book to the process of codification as a novel means of demonstrating textual authority. He sums up his book as an attempt "to frame the beginning of Late Antiquity as a moment of rupture not only in politics but in praxis" (7). The introductory chapter thus frames the whole book through a definition of the intellectual culture of the Theodosian age as an interconnected culture of readers, writers, and books.

In Chapters 2 through 4 Letteney traces the development of the particular, post-Nicene forms of Christian theological argumentation. He begins, in Chapter 2, with a survey of 2nd- and 3rd-century texts that shows the diversity of epistemological approaches in early Christian authors. This diversity, Letteney argues, is based on a consensus that orthodox Christian doctrine can be arrived at via different methods. In Chapter 3, this consensus is upended by the theological controversies of the 4th century and Letteney argues that method became increasingly paramount to determine orthodoxy in the post-Nicene environment: "proper scholarly practice required that universal knowledge which was

the result of aggregation be transmitted along with the aggregated sources themselves so that readers could 'check the work' of the scholar, so to speak" (84). Part 1 concludes with Chapter 4, in which Letteney traces the spread of this method outside the theological controversies and into the broader scholarly world of the Roman Empire. Here, Letteney makes an important insight clear: that the Christianization of the Roman elite can be traced through the spread of Christian styles of argumentation developed in post-Nicene theology.

While the first part of the book advances Letteney's overview of the way Christian argumentation developed and proliferated, the second part of the book, Chapters 5 through 8, examines the texts that these Christian thinkers produced. In Chapter 5, Letteney uses the example of the *Theodosian Code*, the 5th-century compilation of Christianized Roman law, to exemplify the potency attached to the new material form of the codex and symbolic of the changes in scholarly production that Letteney outlines in Part 1. Chapters 6 and 7 trace the imprints of these same changes across the textual production in both Christian and non-Christian scholarly activity. Letteney here shifts to using lexical and codicological tools to show how these scholarly tools are imprinted in the manuscripts of the 5th century. As Letteney says, "professionals trained in Christian scribal practices and iconography took their talents to work on nontheological texts, such that the contemporary scholarly separation of 'secular' from 'sacred' Theodosian Age material becomes a distinction without a difference" (198). In Chapter 8, Letteney brings this conclusion to bear on an even wider range of texts, including a persuasive reading of the *Palestinian Talmud*, a reading that further exemplifies his argument that these methods of scholarly work are broadly institutionalized across Late Antiquity.

Letteney is attempting "to trace a constellation of ideas about truth, and how a variety of late ancient scholars thought about, and went about, bringing it to light" (225). Ultimately, this is an argument about textuality in Antiquity: how texts communicate truth or whether that is even possible. It is precisely this transformation, from "pre-textual" truths to truths that are only arbitrated through the interpretation of texts, that is revealed in the texts Letteney evaluates. In addition, these very manuscripts of the texts have themselves become the structuring agents of these truths. Letteney's point is less a complete theory "Christianization" than it is a valuable examination of how Christianization is evident in the production of knowledge, both theoretically and materially. The use of Christian methodological tools and methods of textual production across the Rome world culminates in the *Theodosian Code*.

Letteney's concluding point, that the very concept of Christianization here is more than a unidirectional movement, is illustrated in his final thoughts on the *Theodosian Code*. As this text is the product of Christian modes of thinking and textual production, "we could conclude that, therefore, the Theodosian Code is a Christian production. Alternatively, we could say that the Christian/non-Christian distinction fails in this context" (227). Letteney turns to the *Theodosian Code* in detail in the very helpful appendix to the book. Herein lies the payoff of Letteney's argument: if we are to understand the Roman world as having "become Christian", then it is necessary to pose, as Letteney does in the appendix, Roman law as a "test case" (228) that can open up the dialogical nature of this exchange between Christian and traditional Roman thought. While Letteney admits that arguing for an interconnectedness between theological and judicial scholarship is not a novel move, the test case provided in this book gives credence to Letteney's overall conceit that we can, in fact, trace how this transformation was practiced and can articulate, here in a novel way, this in terms of "Christianization".

This is a complex and compelling book that makes a sophisticated argument, one which should appeal to any student of antiquity, textual studies, book culture, and material history. Letteney does an admirable job of marshalling a wide range of sources to balance his dual interest in both the content of the texts and their material production. While the scope of his argument may seem daunting, Letteney handles these sources deftly and manages to bring together the various threads of his argument into a thoughtful conclusion. It will not be at all surprising if this work provides the impetus for more investigation into the nature of Christianization in Late Antiquity and where we might find the migration of Christian methodological tools and modes of textual production into other areas, both geographic and intellectual. *The Christianization of Knowledge* will certainly spur further inquiry as it proves to be a fascinating study into the intellectual environment of the Late Antique world.

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Work Cited

Latour, Bruno. 1983. "Give Me a Laboratory and I Will Raise the World". In *Science Observed: Perspectives on the Social Study of Science*, edited by Karin Knorr Cetina, 143–70. London: Sage.