Conclusion

It is a characteristic of human thought that our concepts do not stay put behind the neat logical fences philosophers like to erect for them. Like sly coyotes, they slip past these flimsy barriers to range far and wide, picking up consorts of all varieties, and, in astonishingly fecund acts of miscegenation shocking to conceptual purists, leave offspring who bear a disturbing resemblance to the wayward parent and inherit the impulse to roam the old territory. The philosophical guardians of these offspring, trying to shake off the taint of sexual scandal but feeling guilty about the effort, don't quite know whether to cover up a concept's pedigree or ... deny that it matters.[1]

I have attempted 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. Even *if* truths are unchanging, there is a history to the way that people have sought to access it. That history is obscured when modern disciplinary boundaries become wardens of historical imagination, limiting our estimation of ancient networks of influence. I have argued that the rise of Christianity in the Roman empire caused a revolution in meaning-making, and that as Nicene Christians came to hold positions of imperial power, their argumentative methods and aims found expression in domains of knowledge production far removed from theology.

I argued that Christians were not always "people of the book" – that, instead, antiquity witnesses a spectrum of Christian approaches to finding truth. Some preferred to understand truth as something latent in textual traditions: letters and "memoirs of the apostles" whose text will yield an

---

[1] Anderson, "Feminist Epistemology," 62.

abundance of universally binding precepts if read with the right set of assumptions and hermeneutical strategies. Others, such as Tertullian, saw truth as fundamentally pre-textual, while others still found textual interpretation to be an impotent distraction; the author of the *Gospel of Truth* asserted that truth could not be contained in language, let alone on parchment.

But a group of textually interested Christians were the recipients of imperial largesse from an emperor who was, after all, Roman, and concerned with the same "peace of the gods" that had preoccupied emperors before him. Constantine's obsession with unity, and with the relationship between doctrinal harmony and heavenly favor, led him to demand a solution to a theological problem roiling the clerical elite: a problem predicated on the idea that scriptural texts held cosmic truths and that those truths were accessible through close scrutiny. But, beginning already in the 320s, Constantine and his advisors found that the underdetermined nature of scripture itself frustrated any attempt to divine universal doctrine solely through textual interpretation. Factions arose, each claiming different interpretations of the same text. A group of clerics debating the relationship of the Christian Father to the Son found scriptural interpretation incapable of answering the question with satisfactory finality, and disputants on either side of the debate invented new tools to answer the question that traditional methods were unable to adjudicate.

Theological scholars conceived and refined these tools during a generation spanning the middle decades of the fourth century, while Christians gained stature and their numbers swelled across the empire. By the time that Theodosius I ascended to the purple and instituted a violent purge of anti-Nicene voices,[2] the ground rules of theological discourse had fundamentally shifted; Christian scholars of the late fourth century went about producing knowledge differently from their predecessors, and it was these same Christian scholars who came to hold the reins of power across the empire under the aegis of Theodosius I and his dynastic offspring.

Ideas, including ideas about how one might get at truth, are remarkably fecund. I have argued that Nicene Christian scholars came to power in the Theodosian empire armed with scholastic practices inflected by

---

[2] There were pre-Theodosian purges of heretical and Traditionalist elites from the imperial administration (and from life, in some cases), though none so systematic or theologically interested as those carried out under Theodosius I. Some purges, like that carried out by Valens in 372, were anti-Traditionalist in effect, though not in design. See Lenski, *Failure of Empire*, 223–226.

doctrinal controversy, but that this peculiarly Christian structure of knowledge did not long remain solely the purview of theologians. A manner of thinking about truth – including a fundamental interest in universal truth itself as a worthwhile pursuit – found its way from the rarified air of theological disputation into other domains of knowledge. Across the ideological and intellectual landscape of the Theodosian empire, scholars searched for universal truths in their own areas of expertise, and they did so using a method of aggregation, distillation, and promulgation that was initially conceived to settle a thorny theological dispute. Christian and Traditionalist scholars alike took up this method in works of law, history, and miscellany. Glimmers of it can even be seen in the *Palestinian Talmud*, helping us to situate that production as particularly Roman provincial literature.

The proliferation of a scholastic regime that began as a theological tool through "secular" domains is an aspect of Christianization. It shows us how dominant modes of thought can be ported from one field of inquiry to another in the same way that, for instance, the earliest critical scholars of the bible used advances in genetic and evolutionary theory to understand the relationship between texts and the proliferation of "heresies" in the early Jesus movement.[3] In Late Antiquity, legal scholars used the dominant scholastic framework to craft the *Theodosian Code*. Given the Christian foundations of that framework, 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. We could contend that, if the adjective "Christian" is to have any analytical purchase, it must be capable of making a distinction; because the methods used to produce the *Theodosian Code* were dominant, we might argue that it doesn't *mean anything* – it doesn't make a difference – to say that the use of a "Christianized structure of knowledge" in the framing of the *Theodosian Code* serves to categorize the work as Christian.

What I want to say is that the answer to the question depends on the analytical interests of the person asking. When describing the great scholarly productions of the Theodosian Age, the Christian/non-Christian distinction may be a distraction, or a distinction without a difference. At the same time, there is value in understanding the history of practices which inflected the production of the first universal codification of Roman

---

[3] Lin, *The Erotic Life of Manuscripts: New Testament Textual Criticism and the Biological Sciences*.

legal truth, or a great late ancient work of bookish antiquarianism such as Macrobius's *Saturnalia*. As I have told it, that history is inflected by doctrinal disputes of the early fourth century, and in this sense the history of juristic practice, antiquarian method, and Christian theological disputation are intimately intertwined – not to mention historiography, military history, or any of the other domains of Theodosian knowledge production detailed in this book. I have tried to trace the inter-implication of Christian ways of knowing and Roman modes of knowledge production, and to show that Christian doctrinal disputes affected ancient people even when those ancient people did not know, or care, about the theological truths under discussion.

Historians can ply their trade without detailed knowledge of the history of method. Countless scholars of antiquity write beautifully compelling, methodologically sound historical accounts without knowing the ins and outs of Prussian academic culture and nationalist fervor that initially animated the methods that we currently employ. Historians can perform intensive, virtuosic post-structuralist analyses deeply indebted to the "literary turn" without any knowledge of what happened in Paris, California, and elsewhere during the 1960s and 1970s.[4] So, too, could a Theodosian Traditionalist, or Christian, write a miscellany, history, military handbook, or code of law that employed Nicene Christian methods even if they had no knowledge of the contours of the Nicene controversy itself. Nevertheless, the history of method matters. This is the argument that I have made: that there is a history to how people think about producing valid knowledge, and in this instance, understanding the theological disputes of the fourth century helps us to contextualize the scholastic field of the fifth.

I could have told the story in any number of ways. I have chosen to tell this story in this manner because I think that it helps to elucidate a number of fascinating shifts in Late Antiquity that reverberate even today. My major focus, on theologians and jurists and the shared methods between them, is not exclusive of other scholastic network entanglements during the Theodosian Age. Rather, theologians and jurists present a potent test case, helping to clarify the extent of methodological exchange across ancient disciplines that today are studied in very different corners of the academy. The Theodosian Age reverberates in contemporary society most potently, perhaps, from the epistemic overlap in juristic and

---

[4] The fact that Elizabeth Clark had to write a book about "how we got here" only further illustrates the point. Clark, *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn*.

theological scholarship. We clarify the notion of law as a fundamentally textual and interpretive discourse, for instance, by understanding a time when it was not, and by investigating the circumstances in which law codes first started to look like bibles, and vice versa. The strange, fetishistic power of books in contemporary American discourse, in which the final act of presidential investiture is accomplished with a politician's hand on a bible, has part of its roots in the conflation of code, codex, and codification explored here, and the institutionalization of material, biblical power that spread through the Roman empire of the late fourth century. The extraordinary durability of these ideas has obscured their complex genesis in Christian Rome of the fourth and fifth centuries. By diving deep into the literature and material of the period, we may yet uncover some pearls of great price that help to understand what it means for a society itself to "become Christian."