



**Institute for Religion &  
Critical Inquiry**



*Modes of Knowing and the Ordering of  
Knowledge in Early Christianity c. 100-700*



# MODES OF KNOWING AND THE ORDERING OF KNOWLEDGE IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY C. 100-700

## *A Short Program Overview*

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### **ABSTRACT**

We aim to study ‘modes of knowing’ constructed by Greek, Latin and Syriac Christians 100-700 CE in relation to (i) contemporary theological, philosophical, medical and rhetorical discourses; (ii) institutional structures (of empire, education and catechesis, liturgy, church, holy experts); (iii) and the materiality and embodied social practices of early Christianity (relics, sacred texts, asceticism, pilgrimage, liturgies). We then ask how this construction of Christian epistemologies through cultural and intellectual appropriations might inform modern theological reflection on Christian traditions engaging with modernity. The project thus aims to advance a novel account of early Christian epistemology, intellectual culture and social practice, and provide resources for interactions between faith and culture today.

### **BACKGROUND**

Between the second and the seventh century, Christianity succeeded not only in expanding throughout the Mediterranean basin and beyond, but simultaneously made its own the intellectual traditions of the Greco-Roman world. In the light of the belief that Christian faith enabled a reinterpretation of history and a division of true from false wisdom in other philosophical and religious traditions, Christians sought to encompass, reorganize, and reorient existing bodies of knowledge and existing conceptions of the process of knowing. They attempted to integrate and appropriate different branches of classical expertise under the rubric of seeking knowledge of and assimilation to the divine; and, appropriating Classical exemplars, they sought ways of integrating bodily practices, ethics, and political identity with theologically informed conceptions of reasoning. Christian perspectives provided a basis for rethinking Classical traditions while Classical and Jewish precedents significantly nurtured and shaped Christian intellectual traditions at the very deepest levels from the moment of their emergence.

In this process, Christians developed cultures of interpretation and argument, defining what it meant for them to be a textually-oriented community within the changing Roman Empire.

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’ placed Christ the revealer of truth at the centre of Christian intellectual endeavour, and forced Christian thinkers into a multifaceted, often tense, and yet frequently fruitful engagement with established epistemic schemes and standards in Classical philosophy, rhetoric, and medicine. Through this engagement, early Christian thinkers gave rise to new streams within the flow of the ancient philosophical tradition, laid claim to Classical medicine, and developed their own literary methods, cultures, and interpretive communities. Contests over theories of knowledge were in turn shaped by the institutional realities of empire, education, and the emerging Christian ecclesial community, which together helped form Christian identity and transmit it across time. In the context of these institutional structures, Christian practices of pilgrimage, liturgical life, asceticism, art and architecture, and use of sacred objects such as relics and holy books shaped epistemic commitments by calling for knowledge to be ordered and pursued in specific ways – for example, toward the goal of become godlike (*theosis*) through the better alignment of bodily and spiritual senses.

Central to this intellectual project was the notion of ‘order,’ itself adapted from Greco-Roman philosophical and rhetorical sources. The second-century Roman Christian Tatian exemplifies the role played by the concept of ‘order’ in this period. According to Tatian, an original cosmological ‘order’ was set in motion by the divine in the beginning, though the present state of the world was one of disorder brought about by disobedient angelic and human beings, producing vice, disease, and physical corruption. Yet 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. Missionary preaching therefore became a process of imitating the original divine act of ‘ordering’ the creation so as to ‘reorder the confusion’ apparent in those who followed the old gods of Greece and Rome. Given that he was a member of a small religious sect less than a century and a half old, Tatian’s claims appear wildly ambitious, and yet remarkably, by the end of our period of focus, Christianity had largely succeeded in fulfilling this ambition. For example, the encyclopedic efforts of Isidore of Seville, whose massive *Etymologiae* became one of the most influential works of the middle ages, represent the perpetuation of this attempt to ‘order’ all human knowledge; similarly, the adaptation by early Christians of Platonic traditions of the ‘ascent’ of the intellect toward the intelligible world shaped ways to conceive the activity of knowing and contemplation that would persist long into the modern period.

Despite the centrality of epistemic standards and processes of ordering knowledge for early Christianity’s communal identity and intellectual claims, there is no synthetic study of Christian epistemology across the patristic period. Further, recent advances in Classical scholarship inspired by broadly Foucauldian cultural history pose an urgent challenge to intellectual historians of early Christianity, by emphasising with new force how imperial power structures and communal practices affect the *ordering* of knowledge. For example, such research has viewed attempts at encyclopaedic knowledge as driven by and serving imperial ideologies. If scholars of Christianity remain committed (as we do) to the claim that novel Christian ideas cannot merely be reduced to material, institutional, and economic factors or power discourses, but instead genuinely shaped the doctrine and experience of early Christianity in important ways, then accounts of the development of Christian thought now need to situate patristic theology in its cultural context much more rigorously than the standard histories of dogma of previous generations. Conversely, there is also room for more theologically and methodologically aware

deployment of cultural and historiographical theory in new accounts of early Christian epistemology.

Finally, our new account of the formation of early Christian epistemology in its intellectual, institutional, and cultural context promises to provide resources for modern theologians thinking through questions about the development and historical specificity of traditions, and the intersection of Christianity with wider cultures and belief systems. Over the past century, modern Christian thinkers have been increasingly concerned to find ways of engaging the formative world of early Christianity with new historical seriousness to develop constructive theological proposals. Our research program hopes to stimulate a new step forward in that engagement by offering a fresh account of early Christian epistemology that can inform twenty-first-century theology.

Studying early Christian epistemologies therefore promises to illumine central Christian truth claims then and now, exploring contests that were crucial for creating distinctively Christian identity and community, the processes of appropriation by Christians of key elements of the cultural and intellectual life of the Greco-Roman empire, and relationships between early Christianity and modern theology. In mapping early Christian engagement with its contemporary cultures and intellectual worlds, the project poses new questions about the providential necessity of engagement with wider cultural forms, and the degree to which Christianity can be thought of as a distinct discourse.

## RESEARCH THEMES

The program engages with questions of early Christian epistemology and their modern consequences by focusing on four intersecting and interdisciplinary research themes:

1. **Early Christian epistemology and classical discourses:** This strand of the program studies how Christians appropriated and transformed classical philosophy, rhetoric, and medicine to construct their own modes of knowing. Drawing especially on methods from cultural and intellectual history, philosophy, and literary studies, it connects Christianity to elite Classical discourses, and asks how Christian theological and cultural claims motivated Christians to adapt and transform them in the process of creating Christian epistemologies and associated intellectual communities. Key research questions concern which aspects of classical epistemologies from different fields of knowledge were most formative for different thinkers; the extent to which geography or language group affects which classical epistemologies were crucial and how they were appropriated; the effect of genre on epistemological claims; and how otherwise marginalised discourses (e.g. Gnosticism and Montanism) affected early-Christian ways of knowing. Most ambitiously, the project seeks to contribute to the task of writing Christianity into genealogies of ancient philosophy, medicine, and rhetoric to expand understanding of these intellectual systems while identifying distinctive Christian contributions.

Examples of related individual projects include: Ayres's study of early Christian exegesis and its relation to classical reading practices; Champion's of Christian and philosophical accounts of godlikeness, knowledge, and virtue; Crawford's of Christianisation of literary form and grammatical tools in the Eusebian gospel canons, and his account of philosophical and theological disputation in Cyril's *Contra Iulianum*; Heath's of Christianised miscellany and the reordering of knowledge as Christian gnosis; Zecher's study of the medical background of monastic writers and confessional practices; Gador-Whyte's study of dialogue and letter forms in Greek and Syriac post-conquest texts; Norman's study of the adaptation of ancient medicine for theological metaphors by early Christians, and also her study of the transformation of the philosophical dialogue form under the influence of Christianity; and Radde-Gallwitz's focus on Gregory of Nyssa's use of diverse classical genres in his doctrinal writings, and on Christianity and the philosophical commentary tradition, including Aristotelian, Platonic, and Christian ideas about creation.

2. **Early Christian epistemology and ancient institutions:** How did ancient social institutions shape Christian attempts to order knowledge, construct authoritative knowledge, and develop methods for gaining access to Christian truth? This strand of the project draws on recent sociological thinking about institutions and social structures to investigate how Christian knowledge was ordered and transmitted over time. Key research questions include: how were early Christian ways of knowing affected by imperial power structures and ideologies; how did institutional forms of education, liturgy, and the emergence of the holy man and intellectual expert affect Christian epistemologies; to what extent did distinctive Christian institutions develop and then help shape emerging modes of knowing? We hope to engage with recent work on the development and change of educational institutions in late antiquity, especially viewing educational institutions as a means of cultural and intellectual transformation.

In individual studies, all CIPs thus place classical institutions of education (schools of grammar, rhetoric, medicine and philosophy) and emerging Christian educational institutions (e.g. in monasteries and related to catechesis) at the centre of analysis. They also take seriously institutional pressures of empire to order and universalise knowledge claims, interacting with a broadly Foucauldian agenda. They also ask about the social orders that are formed by particular ways of knowing and ordering knowledge, and particularly investigate resulting social violence, for example in Crawford's study of religious conflict in Alexandria; Gador-Whyte's focus on re-ordering knowledge after the Islamic conquests and in conflict with Islamic constructions of knowledge; Norman's investigation into changing educational possibilities for women and the resultant impact upon the representation of women as philosophers in dialogues, along with the growing influence of Roman law courts on a traditionally Greek genre; and Zecher's examination of the ritualization of monastic confessional practices.

3. **Early Christian epistemology and embodied cultural practices:** This strand of the project asks how cultural practices such as festivals, liturgies, pilgrimage, the adoration of relics, the production of Christian art and architecture, or treating books as sacred, both generated and constrained early Christian epistemologies. It thus puts the emphasis on how early Christian ideas and ordering of knowledge were related to embodiment and materiality, drawing inspiration especially from practice theory, cognitive psychology, cultural history, and theories of ritual, embodiment, and visual culture.

Heath's study of 'Mary as Christian epistemology – part of broader work on how images can contribute to the formation of doctrine, imagination, aesthetics and exegesis – contributes centrally to this strand. Ayres emphasises reading practices and textuality in his exegesis project. Champion explores how Christians come to know holiness on the way to sanctification: through asceticism, on pilgrimage, through icons and in other embodied practices. Crawford's study of the gospel canons scrutinises visual media and theories of information visualisation as forms of embodied knowing. Radde-Gallwitz will place ritual practices of baptism at the heart of Gregory of Nyssa's Trinitarian theology. Zecher sets confession in context of medical practices and theories of body-soul interaction. Gador-Whyte will examine liturgical modes of knowing through the kontakia of Romanos the Melodist. Norman's research is particularly interested in the use of medical metaphors of rebirth in the liturgical contexts of the sacraments of initiation.

4. **Early Christian epistemology and modern theology:** In a constructive theological mode, we explore the continued relevance for modern theology of early Christian appropriations of classical thought and culture, and the epistemological claims which arose from this interaction. Research questions include: how might the program's specific findings about the interaction between early Christian thinkers and their world (its discourses, institutions and materiality) inflect contemporary theological reflection; what obstacles stand in the way of the modern appropriation of early Christian discourses and modes of knowing?

To this end, Ayres will build on his 2011 Fisher Lectures at Cambridge in a monograph on the struggle to appropriate early Christian discourse in the Catholic world between 1930 and today. Champion's will explore how far and to what end modern accounts of theosis engage with early Christian formulations of godlikeness. Crawford's study of pagan-Christian polemic in Alexandria intersects with modern images of Christianity as antithetical to reason. Heath's study insists that modern theology cannot afford to separate cognitive and embodied forms of life nor to separate theology from other modern disciplines such as cultural history, cognitive psychology, and literary studies. Radde-Gallwitz will test the extent to which early Christian accounts of creation are relevant to the relation between Christian and scientific epistemologies today. Zecher's project implicates the logic of contemporary practices in Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches, and will offer insight into the relationship between confessional practices and other forms of therapy, such as psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. Norman's project on medical metaphors in the ancient Christian world will illuminate how easily theology relies on medical metaphors even in the modern day, though often without the historical understanding of the science relied upon.

### **ACTIVITIES AND PUBLICATIONS**

Annual seminars at ACU's Rome Campus and panel sessions at major conferences will explore the three main themes in key historical periods, and then apply what has been learned about early Christian cultural and intellectual appropriations to problems in modern theology and its engagement with contemporary culture. We intend to edit a multi-volume series and a special journal issue arising from these seminars and panels. The Chief Investigators and research fellows associated with the project also aim to produce individual articles and monographs. Finally, three PhD projects will explore the different themes across different language groups.

### **FURTHER INFORMATION**

For further information about the project overall, please contact [lewis.ayres@acu.edu.au](mailto:lewis.ayres@acu.edu.au). For individual projects of Chief Investigators please contact them: [michael.champion@acu.edu.au](mailto:michael.champion@acu.edu.au); [matthew.crawford@acu.edu.au](mailto:matthew.crawford@acu.edu.au); [j.m.f.heath@durham.ac.uk](mailto:j.m.f.heath@durham.ac.uk); [araddega@nd.edu](mailto:araddega@nd.edu).

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