

## A Methodological Revolution in Fourth-Century Theology

### CONSTANTINE'S IDEALIZED WORLD ORDER: UNIVERSALITY THROUGH UNITY

Constantine was obsessed with unity. We know this because of the archive attesting to his guidance in adjudicating the Nicene controversy, comprising letters from the emperor to his subordinates trying to diffuse an increasingly tense battle of minds and wills.<sup>1</sup> But Constantine's concern with unity was epistemic rather than preceptual. The first Christian emperor was ultimately unconcerned with the subject upon which his subordinates agreed, as I argue later in this chapter. Rather, he was interested chiefly in the fact of their agreement, and with the relationship between intellectual unity and the bestowal of divine favor on the empire.<sup>2</sup>

In the early years of the Nicene controversy Constantine wrote a letter to its two central disputants: an Alexandrian presbyter named Arius and Alexander, the metropolitan bishop of Alexandria:

Oh glorious and godly Providence! How deadly a wound my ears suffered, or rather my very heart, for the information that the division originating among you was much graver than those I had left behind there,<sup>3</sup> so that your regions, from which I had hoped medicine would be supplied to others, were now in greater

<sup>1</sup> The sources are mostly preserved in Eusebius's *The Life of Constantine* and Athanasius's *Concerning the Pronouncements of the Council of Nicaea*, though a few letters are available only or additionally in the fifth century historical productions of Socrates, Sozomen, and Gelasius of Cyzicus.

<sup>2</sup> This point is famously uncontroversial. See Drake, "Constantine and Consensus," 5.

<sup>3</sup> Here Constantine alludes obliquely to the "Donatist controversy."

need of healing. As I considered the origin and occasion for these things, the cause was exposed as *extremely trivial and quite unworthy of so much controversy*. Being driven therefore to the need for this letter, and addressing myself to that discretion which you have in common, and calling first on the divine Providence to support my action, I offer my modest services as a peaceful arbitrator between you in your dispute.<sup>4</sup>

As will become clear, Constantine took his role as mediator seriously. In this letter, dated to 324<sup>5</sup> (and thus immediately before the Council of Nicaea was convened), the emperor stakes out his initial position on the question that Arius and Alexander disputed, and which they had formed intellectual alliances to defend.<sup>6</sup> To Constantine, the question was inane – asked out of foolishness and answered in haste. “Now forgive one another for both the careless question and the ill-considered answer,” orders Constantine, and let the clergy behave as a philosophical school.

So that I may bring to the attention of your judgment a little paradigm: you obviously know that the philosophers themselves agree together on one set of principles (ἐνὶ μὲν ἅπαντες δόγματι συντίθενται), though often when they disagree in a portion of their opinions (πολλάκις δὲ ἐπειδὴν ἔν τινι τῶν ἀποφάσεων μέρει διαφωνῶσιν). And although they are separated in their learned skill (τῆ τῆς ἐπιστήμης ἄρετῆ χωρίζονται), yet they agree together again in unity when it comes to basic principle (τοῦ δόγματος). If this is so, isn't it much more right that we, who are the appointed servants of the great God should, in a religious commitment of this kind, be of one mind with each other (ὁμοψυχους ἀλλήλοις εἶναι)?<sup>7</sup>

The emperor made clear that there was no discernible difference between Arius and Alexander regarding matters of cultic import and thus ordered them to reestablish communion.<sup>8</sup> Constantine held that as long as divergent theological viewpoints were justifiable under the umbrella of Orthodoxy they were to be tolerated by the clerical elite. This is a

<sup>4</sup> Preserved in Eusebius *Life of Constantine* 2.68. (Also extant in Socrates *Ecclesiastical History* 1.7, and Gelasius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.4.) Translations of the *Life of Constantine* are adapted from Cameron and Hall. Text GCS 7.

<sup>5</sup> The precise date of these letters is disputed. Throughout I have opted for the traditional dates assigned by Opitz in AW. Sara Parvis has redated (though not systematically) the “flurry of letters” (72) surrounding the Council of Nicaea, in some instances changing the order suggested by Opitz and in most cases simply suggesting a later date, closer to the council. For my purposes the precise date and order of these sources is irrelevant. See Parvis, *Marcellus of Ancyra and the Lost Years of the Arian Controversy, 325–345*, 72–83.

<sup>6</sup> On the formation of alliances in the lead-up to the council, and the known members of each side, see Parvis, *Marcellus of Ancyra*, 39–68.

<sup>7</sup> Preserved in Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 2.71. <sup>8</sup> Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 2.70.

position from which Constantine did not sway, even as he ordered the banishment of Arius and two members of his party less than a year later. The question, then as ever, was how wide the umbrella of orthodoxy cast its shadow, and whether it should be assumed to cover mostly matters of practice or primarily matters of belief.

At first glance, the emperor's fragmentary letter to the church at Nicomedia after the Council of Nicaea sounds like an abrupt departure from the conciliatory tone taken in the previous letter to Arius and Alexander:

A council took place at the city of Nicaea, you will remember, at which I myself was present, as befit my conscience. Desiring nothing other than to establish complete unity (ὁμόνοιαν ἄπασιν), and above all to scrutinize and ultimately dispense with this matter which was conceived through the madness of Arius the Alexandrian, but quickly gained traction by the outrageous and ruinous diligence of Eusebius [of Nicomedia].<sup>9</sup>

This letter appears to present a stark divergence from the letter of Constantine of the previous letter, where he urged the disputing factions to set aside their differences for the good of the community because their differences were neither cultically actionable nor, to his mind, particularly interesting. The question of the precise relationship of the Son to the Father, adjudicated in excruciating detail at the council under Constantine's own aegis, was "a careless question" that elicited "an ill-considered answer."

How can it be that Constantine appears to have changed his mind so drastically on the substance of the question while remaining convinced that his actions aimed only at unity in the church? On a cursory reading it might seem that Constantine's rhetoric is expedient and duplicitous: he has sided with the "winners" of the council. But this answer is too easy, and it fails to account for the fact of the Council of Nicaea itself. Before the Council of Arles in 314 that was similarly called by Constantine, there was no precedent for imperially sanctioned meetings whose aim is to hammer out theological points and arrive at a state of unity.<sup>10</sup> There is

<sup>9</sup> *Urk.* 27.13. Preserved in Athanasius, *Concerning the Pronouncements of the Council of Nicaea* 41.13. (Extant also in Gelasius *Ecclesiastical History* 3 and Theodoret *Ecclesiastical History* 1.20.)

<sup>10</sup> It is unlikely that Constantine attended this council, despite the assertion of Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 59; and Mark Edwards' hopeful reading of the *Life of Constantine* 1.44 in *Optatus: Against the Donatists*, 188n18. As Pottenger notes, "even if Constantine did not attend Arles, the unprecedented step of a church council summoned by an emperor (as opposed to a judicial hearing overseen by a panel of

no reason to think that the pronouncements of ecclesiastical councils would have come to represent the primary node of authority within later Christian theological disputation without Constantine's own initiative.<sup>11</sup> Rather, it was Constantine's lifelong obsession with unity that led to his calling for councils in the first place.<sup>12</sup> We cannot then say that his seeming "change of position" relies on the authority of the Council of Nicaea – the authority of the council is a direct result of Constantine's sanction, a patronage borne of his singular concern for unity regardless of the particular, preceptual content of that singular faith.

By his own admission the emperor's obsession with ecclesial unity overlies a traditional Roman concern for the "peace of the gods (*pax deorum*)"; human beings please the gods under the direction of the emperor, and the gods bestow gifts upon the empire in return. When Constantine called for unity among the Catholic community he did not invoke some internal theological need as justification. Rather, he warned that dissension may lead the Christian god to withhold favor from his reign.<sup>13</sup> His letter to Alexander and Arius quoted earlier, composed on the eve of the Council of Nicaea, begins as follows:

Conqueror Constantinus Maximus Augustus to Alexander and Arius. I call god himself to witness, as I should, the helper in my undertakings and savior of the universe, that a twofold purpose impelled me to undertake the duty which I have performed. My first concern was that the attitude towards the divinity of all the provinces should be united in one consistent view (πρῶτον μὲν γὰρ τὴν ἀπάντων τῶν ἔθνῶν περὶ τὸ θεῖον πρόθεσιν εἰς μίαν ἕξωσ ὑστάσιν ἐνώσσαι), and my second that I might restore and heal the body of the republic which lay severely wounded. In making provision for these objects, I began to think out the former with the hidden eye of reason, and I tried to rectify the latter by the power of the military arm. I knew that if I were to establish a general concord (ὁμόνοιαν καταστήσαιμι) among the servants of god (ἅπασιν τοῖς τοῦ θεοῦ θεράπουσιν) in accordance with my

bishops) nevertheless represented his greater degree of involvement. In any case, he took no active role in the Council itself." Pottenger, "Developing Imperial Doctrines of Power in the Rhetoric of Constantine the Great on Internal Ecclesiastical Conflicts," 75.

<sup>11</sup> On the importation of theological dispute into the realm of Roman civil law under Constantine, see Lenski, "Constantine and the Donatists: Exploring the Limits of Religious Toleration," 104–109; and Calderone, *Costantino e il Cattolicesimo*, 230–249.

<sup>12</sup> "The consistency in Constantine's policies had been not doctrines, but the dream of political and religious unity." Van Dam, *The Roman Revolution of Constantine*, 281.

<sup>13</sup> On Constantine's similar concern regarding the Donatist schism, see Pottenger, "Developing Imperial Doctrines of Power," 68–73.

prayers, the course of public affairs (ἡ τῶν δημοσίων πραγμάτων χρεία) would also enjoy the change consonant with the pious desires of all.<sup>14</sup>

Here Constantine claims two interrelated purposes: the unity of doctrine and the prosperity of the empire. These are not separate issues, he clarifies, but two sides of the same coin: only doctrinal unity guarantees divine favor – the divine favor that undergirded his own claim to imperial authority, as it had for his Tetrarchic predecessors.<sup>15</sup> He expressed the same purpose in a general letter to Catholic communities written just a few days after the Council of Nicaea's close:

Constantine Augustus, to the churches. Having learned from experience of the prosperity of public affairs how great is the grace of the divine power, I have judged it appropriate for me that my aim before all else should be that among the most blessed congregations of the universal church (τοῖς μακαριωτάτοις τῆς καθολικῆς ἐκκλησίας πλήθεσι) a single faith and a pure love and a religion that is unanimous about almighty god be observed (πίστις μία καὶ εἰλικρινῆς ἀγάπη ὁμογνώμων τε περὶ τὸν παγκρατῆ θεὸν εὐσέβεια τηρῆται). This, however, could not achieve an irreversible and secure settlement unless, after all or the great majority of the bishops had gathered in the same place, a decision was taken upon each of the points affecting the most holy religion. For this reason when most had been assembled, and I myself as one of you was also among those present . . . all topics were subject to proper discussion until the point was reached where the doctrine pleasing to the all-seeing god of all was brought to light as the basis for unanimous agreement (πρὸς τὴν τῆς ἐνότητος συμφωνίαν εἰς φῶς προήχθη), so that nothing remained to cause further difference of opinion or dispute about faith (ὡς μηδὲν ἔτι πρὸς διχόνοιαν ἢ πίστεως ἀμφισβήτησιν ὑπολείπεσθαι).<sup>16</sup>

A traditional interpretation of this letter would agree with James Stevenson, that Constantine simply misunderstood the significance of the dispute.<sup>17</sup> Seen in the context of Constantine's broader interest in unity and the material consequences of dissent, and taking the emperor's own assertion of intent at face value, we can say that the traditional interpretation is woefully inadequate. Rather, in this letter Constantine

<sup>14</sup> Preserved in Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 2.64–65.

<sup>15</sup> Van Dam, *The Roman Revolution of Constantine*, 230–234. Some of Constantine's successors, too, took a position of studied impartiality. This was especially the case for Jovian and Valentinian I, on which see Lenski, *Failure of Empire: Valens and the Roman State in the Fourth Century A.D.*, 237–239.

<sup>16</sup> Preserved in Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 3.17. (Extant also in Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.9, Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.9, and Gelasius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.37.10.)

<sup>17</sup> Stevenson, *A New Eusebius: Documents Illustrative of the History of the Church to A.D. 337*, 354.

shows that his concern for doctrinal unity was simply not preceptual: he didn't much care what it was that the theologians agreed upon, at least in principle – unity is necessary in the first instance because it is unity that guarantees the general prosperity of the empire.<sup>18</sup> Later in this letter he demonstrates the mechanics of this Christian epistemic commitment in the same way that Valerius Maximus's story at the beginning of Chapter 2 displays the mechanics of Traditionalist Roman epistemology. In Constantine's eyes, it is inappropriate a priori for one group to be fasting while another feasts. "As I am sure you all are already aware, it is for this reason divine Providence desires that this matter should achieve the proper settlement and be brought under a single regulation."<sup>19</sup>

Constantine's concern for proper cultic performance as guarantor of divine protection is not unique to him, nor is it peculiarly Christian. Susanna Elm showed in *Sons of Hellenism* that the *pax deorum*, and by extension the *pax Romana*, was always bound up in the discovery of universal philosophical precepts. "[I]ntegration, especially of things divine, was dangerous, since false teachings of false gods – wrong innovations – threatened the security and longevity of the *oikoumenē*. Greek and Roman history provided sufficient examples of the divine wrath called forth by such mistakes. Who, then, was innovating correctly?"<sup>20</sup> Imperial stability was always an epistemic concern. Cicero makes precisely the same connection in his *Laws*.<sup>21</sup> The logic was not unique to Constantine even among early fourth-century Catholics. In his oration to honor the emperor's thirty years in the purple, Eusebius of Caesarea echoed back to Constantine the connection between doctrinal unity and imperial prosperity, which began already with Augustus:

In this period, one empire flowered everywhere: the Roman empire. And the eternally relentless and irreconcilable hostility of nations was suddenly resolved. As the knowledge of one god was passed down to all people, along with a single manner of piety – the salvific teaching of Christ – in the same way and at the same time, a single ruler rose for all of the Roman empire, and an abiding peace took hold of everything (ἐνα καὶ τὸν αὐτὸν χρόνον καθ' ὅλης τῆς Ῥωμαίων ἀρχῆς ὑποστάντος εἰρήνη βαθεῖα τὰ σύμπαντα διελαμβάνειν). Together – at the same moment, as a single

<sup>18</sup> Whether "unity" was in fact achieved at the Council of Nicaea, what role Eusebius's *Life of Constantine* played in producing that unity, and how much Eusebius's literary predilections stand in the way of adjudicating these questions will forever be up for debate. See Dainese, "Costantino a Nicea. Tra realtà e rappresentazione letteraria"; and Sieben, *Die Konzilsidee in der alten Kirche*, 307–314.

<sup>19</sup> Preserved in Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 3.18. <sup>20</sup> Elm, *Sons of Hellenism*, 123.

<sup>21</sup> Cicero, *Laws* 2.30.

command of god – two beneficial shoots were produced for humankind: the empire of the Romans and the teachings of true worship.<sup>22</sup>

Roman Traditionalists of the later fourth century did not desert the classical understanding of the *pax deorum*, either. Symmachus, one of the last truly influential Traditionalists in the Roman aristocracy, famously scolded the boy emperor Valentinian II in 384. “Who is so friendly with the barbarians that he doesn’t need an Altar of Victoria? . . . Those who it doesn’t benefit – let *them* disdain this power. Don’t you go and abandon a patronage that favors your triumphs (*Vos amicis triumphis patrocinium nolite deserere!*)”<sup>23</sup>

Constantine’s concern with intellectual unity was a traditional Roman anxiety over the *pax deorum* refracted through Christian theological commitments.<sup>24</sup> The emperor’s focus on universality, predicated on the empire’s need of divine favor, defined his approach to truth. His desire to identify and promulgate a statement of universal truth, in turn, determined the shape and focus of the Catholic Christianity that flourished in his wake. This is not to say that before the reign of Constantine, Christian scholars were not interested in doctrinal unity. Rather, before the blending of Christian theology with imperial ideology that occurred under the patronage of Constantine, the impetus toward unity among Christians was never chiefly the general prosperity of the Roman empire. Constantine was a Christian, but he was a *Roman* Christian, and he brought Roman ideologies of religion and state to bear on his adjudication of the Nicene Controversy. It was the first time that Christian theology was being done with an army at its back. The fact that Nicene Christians insisted so assiduously and violently on doctrinal uniformity cannot be separated from a Roman ideology of state laid over theological disputation during the reign of the empire’s first Christian sovereign.

The preceding has been an analysis of the scholarly method of early Christians who were actively forging new ideas about scripture and scriptural interpretation. A young Athanasius was present at the

<sup>22</sup> Eusebius, *Tricennial Orations* 16.4. Translation adapted from Drake, *In Praise of Constantine: A Historical Study and New Translation of Eusebius’ Tricennial Orations*. Text GCS 7.

<sup>23</sup> Symmachus, *Relatio* 3.3–4. Text Jean-Pierre Callu. Symmachus’s deployment of an imperative (*deserere*) in a letter to the emperor is both striking and indicative of a truly unconventional dynamic between the young emperor and the famous prefect at the height of his power. My translation tries to capture the studied condescension.

<sup>24</sup> Lenski makes similar point, on the basis of different evidence, in *Constantine and the Cities*, 78.

Council of Nicaea, intending to apply his keen exegetical skills to scripture: excising biblical language to construct a new statement of faith that could unite factions and bring the unity – and thereby the prosperity – that Constantine so desperately desired. By the end of his life Athanasius had shifted away from his youthful contention that scripture and scriptural interpretation was chiefly important for clarifying doctrine, and so had his Catholic peers.

#### ATHANASIUS OF ALEXANDRIA

Athanasius always punched above his weight. He was enduringly controversial during his life, earning both five imperial exiles and an oration of praise by the bishop of Constantinople, who called him “the pillar of the Church” some eight years after his death.<sup>25</sup> He spent a long life in service of the Nicene definition of faith, which was conceived just three years before he succeeded his patron and mentor Alexander as bishop of Alexandria. Over the course of Athanasius’s public life, which spanned almost precisely the period between the Council of Nicaea and the beginning of the Theodosian dynasty, Orthodox disputants on either side of the Nicene controversy shifted their defensive tactics.<sup>26</sup> Along with his interlocutors and contemporaries, Athanasius moved dramatically away from the interpretation of scriptural text, focusing rather on doctrinal positions that began and terminated with credal statements of faith. Athanasius’s career reflected, and more often catalyzed, the shift in scholastic method that underlies the Theodosian embrace of creeds and codes explored in Chapter 4. For this reason his literary oeuvre, and his impact on the rules and contents of debate in the aftermath of the Council of Nicaea, deserves special attention. The rise of the code perhaps wouldn’t, perhaps couldn’t, have occurred without him.

<sup>25</sup> Gregory Nazianzen, *Oration* 21.26. The specific date of this oration is difficult to pin down, but given that Gregory was bishop of Constantinople only 379–381, and that his oration claims to be given in Constantinople (μετὰ δὲ τοῦτο τὴν μεγαλόπολιν, 22), the range of possible dates is slim. On Athanasius’s rocky relationship with Constantine see Lenski, “Early Retrospective on the Christian Constantine: Athanasius and Firmicus Maternus,” 466–471.

<sup>26</sup> Athanasius was consecrated (one of the) Bishop(s) of Alexandria on April 17, 328, and remained in that post, with the exception of his five exiles, until his death on May 2, 373. For a full chronology of Athanasius’ career, see Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius: Theology and Politics in the Constantinian Empire*, 19–33.



We see a bit of the young Athanasius, maybe in his mid-twenties, in a letter referred to by the first two words of its incipit: *One Body*. The letter is ascribed to Alexander of Alexandria but was likely written by Athanasius himself sometime between 318 and 324.<sup>27</sup> This circular letter to all bishops was one of the “opening shots” of the Nicene controversy, and in it we see two strategies of truth production working together in support of Athanasius’s polemical ends. First, the letter begins by claiming to be centrally motivated by the Constantinian trope of divinely ordained unity:

Since the Universal church is one body (ἑνὸς σώματος ὄντος τῆς καθολικῆς ἐκκλησίας), and we are commanded in the divine Scriptures to maintain “the bond of unity and peace,” it follows that we should write, and mutually acquaint each another with the things that have happened among each of us, so that “if one member suffers or rejoices, we may either sympathize or rejoice with one other.” (*Urk.* 4b.2–3)

That is, this public-facing document from the chancery of Alexander begins with an argument sure to find receptive ears in the imperial court; Athanasius told Constantine what he wanted to hear. Second, in *One Body*, scripture is used as check on credal statements. Specifically, scripture is invoked to falsify a negative creed that (Athanasius asserts) comprises “things that they assert upon discovery, going beyond scripture” (*Urk.* 4b.7). While the faulty “creed” states, for instance, that “the Word of God was not always in existence, but came into being from nothing” (*Urk.* 4b.7), Athanasius responds: “Who that hears John saying, ‘In the beginning was the Word,’ does not condemn those who say, ‘There was a time when the Word did not exist?’” (*Urk.* 4b.12).

The ultimate aim of *One Body* is to condemn heresy and to ostracize those who had been condemned, not to interpret scripture or to offer a positive statement of faith for the Universal (“Catholic” καθολική) community. According to Athanasius, the doctrines attributed to “those around Arius” cannot be true because their statements are falsifiable within the framework of scripture (*Urk.* 4b.11). He appeals to the authority of scripture for falsification but not for interpretation. In the words of

<sup>27</sup> In any event, it came from the chancery in which Athanasius worked as Alexander’s secretary. For a full accounting of the issues involved in both the dating and authorship of this letter and the other documentary texts stemming from the “Arian controversy,” see Parvis, *Marcellus of Ancyra*, 68–83; and Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, 48–59. On this letter specifically, Christopher Stead concluded that “Athanasian authorship of Ἐνὸς σώματος is not merely probable . . . but demonstrably certain.” Stead, “Athanasius’ Earliest Written Work,” 76.

Ellen Muehlberger: “In a way, [Athanasius’s] writings from the 320s and 330s ventriloquized his thoughts through Scripture, taking on the voice of Paul or the voice of the gospels to better say what his own exposition might also have expressed.”<sup>28</sup>

Athanasius wrote *One Body* as a young man, when battle lines of the controversy were still being drawn. At that point there was not even a common term to denote “Arius and those around him.” Thirty years had passed by the time that Athanasius penned the first full account of the Council of Nicaea, and in that interval the polemical and citational outlook had radically shifted.<sup>29</sup> The struggle between Athanasius and George was so well known in Egypt that it filtered even into the rural areas, at least according to Constantius II’s letter to the Alexandrians in 357: “Even among those living on the frontier, who is ignorant of the rivalry in the events that have taken place?”<sup>30</sup> The emperor wrote another letter that same year, addressed to coregents Aezenes and Sazanes, and claiming that news of Athanasius’s disgrace and exile had traversed the length of the Nile, all the way to the Kingdom of Axum.<sup>31</sup>

The situation was dramatically different in the Latin West, where thirty years on, the Creed of Nicaea was still little known – even among the some of the most outspoken theological minds of the day.<sup>32</sup> As late as 359 the necessity of credal statements was not obvious, when Hilary’s exile led him to learn of the theological strife in the East and to write an extensive letter to Western bishops informing them of the dispute, apparently for the first time, and staking out his position on it.<sup>33</sup> But in the Greek East, questions about it were hotly debated. “How was the Nicene Creed created? What is the nature of its authority? What is an Orthodox understanding of the relationship between the Nicene Creed and the scriptural texts that simultaneously interprets and constrains?” Answers to these questions had earned Athanasius two imperial exiles already. By the time another twenty years had passed, however, a Christian senator claimed confidently in a Latin treatise for the emperor that the Nicene

<sup>28</sup> Muehlberger, *Angels in Late Ancient Christianity*, 63.

<sup>29</sup> For a full account of these years, and the pivotal years that Athanasius spent in Rome with Marcellus of Ankyra, see Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology*, 105–117.

<sup>30</sup> Athanasius, *Apology to the Emperor Constantius* 30.3. Text AW 2.8.

<sup>31</sup> Athanasius, *Apology to the Emperor Constantius* 31.5.

<sup>32</sup> Hilary of Poitiers, *Concerning the Synods* 91 (PL 10.545a).

<sup>33</sup> Hilary of Poitiers, *Concerning the Synods* 63 (PL 10.523B–C). On Hilary’s changing rhetoric during exile see Barry, “Heroic Bishops: Hilary of Poitiers’s Exilic Discourse”

Creed was not only universally applicable, but that it was written at a council attended by Christ himself!<sup>34</sup> The story of Christian scholasticism over the fourth century is the story of the Nicene Creed's rise from a distillation of scripture, to a check on scriptural interpretation, and finally to a universal statement by which all exegesis could be judged.

I turn now to Athanasius's *Letter Concerning the Decrees of the Council of Nicaea*: the first full account of the council, composed likely during the bishop's third exile (356–362).<sup>35</sup> The main concern of Athanasius's letter is to construct a new form of argument, one that is able to deal finally with the problem of "Arian"<sup>36</sup> exegetes who justify heretical positions through exegesis of an underdetermined scriptural canon – a canon incapable of refuting Arian arguments once and for all because Arius's supporters continually find new scriptures upon which to base their theological convictions.<sup>37</sup> Athanasius knew the problem already in the 320s when he wrote *One Body*, and nevertheless intended to construct a creed based solely on the words of scripture. "We have often shamed these men by stating these things, and by opening up the divine scriptures for reading. But like chameleons, they morph themselves again" (*Urk.* 4b.16).

According to Athanasius, forty years later the problem was not solely the machinations of Arian interpreters. The problem, rather, was the nature of scripture itself. He begins his *Letter Concerning the Decrees* with a screed against those who focus on scriptural interpretation as a central site of theological contestation, and as a central framework for producing truth. These "chameleons" focus on scriptural interpretation

<sup>34</sup> Ambrose, *On Faith* 1.18.121. Text CSEL 78.51.

<sup>35</sup> Opitz (*AW*, 2.1.2115) first suggested a date of 350/351, but I agree with Brennecke that Athanasius's particular concern with defending the term ὁμοούσιος suggests that the treatise is most intelligible in the context of the Second Sirmian Formula, composed in 357. Brennecke, *Hilarius von Poitiers und die Bischofsopposition gegen Konstantius II: Untersuchungen zur dritten Phase des Arianischen Streites (337–361)*, 1141. *Concerning the Decrees* was not Athanasius's first overt polemic against Arians as such, which began with his sojourn in Rome, alliance with Marcellus, and composition of the *Orations against the Arians* in the 340s, on which see Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 107.

<sup>36</sup> I use the term "Arian" here only due to scholarly convention – there was no group named thus during the period under discussion. Everyone discussed here claimed the same communal identity: Catholic Christian. For his part, after the Council of Nicaea Constantine thought that "Arians" should be called "Porphyrians." *Urk.* 33.

<sup>37</sup> Timothy Barnes rightly argues that another aim of the treatise was more political than intellectual or theological: Athanasius softened his language around Arianism, and who rightly deserves the moniker, in an attempt to mend fences with the men who deposed him. Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius*, 134.

“in extreme perverseness.” When they complain that the creed from Nicaea used terms not found in scripture, they “mutter like the Jews.”<sup>38</sup> In typical style, the preface crescendos with Athanasius throwing scripture back at his enemies, paraphrasing *Ezekiel* 11:2. Heretics indeed do something “according to scripture,” he claims, “they have come to an inane conclusion” (1.2).

The problem was that Arians looked to scriptural interpretation as a primary scholastic tool and were, as such, “latter-day Judaizers” (2.1). They come to their position through both “ignorance of the truth and inexperience in divine scripture” – a phrase that is not simple hendiadys, or merely a rhetorical flourish (17.1). Rather, Athanasius argues that proper knowledge of the truth is pre-scriptural, or that truth is at least conceptually separable from scriptural interpretation. The truth, according to Athanasius, is the teaching handed down from the patrimony of the tradition with a unity of message, beginning with Moses and ending with the very wording of the Nicene Creed.<sup>39</sup> Patrimony and scripture go hand in hand; one cannot exist without the other. This is not a position that Athanasius had always held, however – he came to it only later in life, in the 350s. Nor was it the position of the bishops attending the Council of Nicaea, upon entering the chambers in 325. Richard Vaggione summarized the situation succinctly:

The bishops’ starting-point is said to have been a profession of faith used in one of the local churches and connected with the liturgy of baptism. It was hoped that the addition of a number of specific phrases would exclude the offending propositions and make it possible to define the Son’s relationship to the Father more acceptably. In the beginning the intent was to take these clauses from scripture. The son would be described as “not from nothing, but from God,” the “Word and Wisdom of God,” and “not a creature or thing made.” Moreover, he was to be affirmed as the true Power and Image of the Father, the Word exactly like him in all things . . . existing in him without change or separation. None of these proved adequate. The reason was that in each case the opposition was able to come up

<sup>38</sup> “Why did those convened at Nicaea use terms that are not in scripture, like ‘of the essence’ and ‘singular essence’ (διὰ τὴν οὐσίαν καὶ τὸ ὁμοούσιον)?” *Concerning the Decrees* 1.1. Text AW 2.1. It is very likely that Athanasius’ defense of Nicaea’s terms in *Concerning the Decrees* was written as a response and foil to Eusebius’ *Letter to the Caesareans*. See Ayres, “Athanasius’ Initial Defense of the Term *homoousios*.” Translations made with reference to NPNF and Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 143–171. This passage is conceptually and lexically similar to Athanasius’s first attack on “Arians,” in his *Orations against the Arians* 1.8.

<sup>39</sup> *Concerning the Decrees* 5. The striking correspondence in form and content with *Mishnah Avot* 1 deserves full discussion elsewhere.

with another passage which used the phrase in a sense compatible with the condemned propositions. The only remaining alternative seemed to be to go outside of scripture altogether.<sup>40</sup>

According to Athanasius, the assembled bishops at Nicaea intended to compose a universally binding creed on the basis of scripture alone:

But the fathers, perceiving [their opponents'] craft and the cunning of their impiety, were forced to express more distinctly the sense of "from God," and so they wrote "the Son is from the essence of God" in order that "from God" might not be considered common and equal in both the Son and in things that have come to be; but that all others might be acknowledged as created things, and the Word alone as from the Father. (19.2–3)

In this passage we see Athanasius admit the failure of scripture. As a scholastic method, textual interpretation alone was not sufficient to guarantee the production of true knowledge.<sup>41</sup> In light of this failure, Athanasius turns for the rest of his letter to the creation of a patrimony to support the language of the council, language that in the words of Lewis Ayres had become "verbal talismans" in the polemical debate that raged after the Council of Nicaea. "A term [ὁμοούσιος] originally chosen for polemical purposes and without any dense, well-established theological meaning was gradually identified as a key marker of pro-Nicene orthodoxy."<sup>42</sup>

It is important to remember that this document, written in the mid to late 350s, contains the first significant use of the term "of the same substance (ὁμοούσιος)" by Athanasius – the word that would become the central point of contention for years to come, and that formed the battle line over which opposing factions were drawn up.<sup>43</sup> Again in the words of Lewis Ayres:

Nicaea's creed was not designed to do much more than: (a) earn the approval (however grudging) of a majority present and (b) make it clear that certain perceived errors of Arius and his early supporters were unacceptable. If this is so then perhaps Nicaea's creed was both intended to reflect the views of the coalition who framed its distinctive terminology, and yet had to hide some of their

<sup>40</sup> Vaggione, *Eunomius of Cyzicus and the Nicene Revolution*, 53.

<sup>41</sup> Athanasius's tack here is dissimilar, too, from the precise, lexical argumentative method in his *Orations against the Arians*, on which see Muehlberger, *Angels in Late Ancient Christianity*, 66–69.

<sup>42</sup> Ayres, "Athanasius' Initial Defense of the Term Homooousios: Rereading the *De Decretis*," 339.

<sup>43</sup> He does use it in passing in *Against the Arians* 1.9, but without the kind of defense it gets in *Concerning the Decrees*.

idiosyncrasies in order to provide a common front and to achieve wider consensus at the council . . . Far too much traditional discussion about the disputes immediately after Nicaea takes at face value the fourth-century polemical accusation that a given opponent is distorting Nicaea or its intention. Such tactics hide the pluralistic nature of this original Nicene theology.<sup>44</sup>

It is important also to remember that *Concerning the Decrees* is polemical and creative. It is tempting to read Athanasius's scholastic method in line with the modes of argumentation accepted by a later, more established orthodoxy, but his rhetorical strategy was radical and innovative; the treatise shows Athanasius inventing a new scholastic method by polemicizing against a group that, until very recently, was well within the bounds of "Catholic" Christianity. Éric Rebillard's warning is apt: "scholars interested in Christian polemical debates in late antiquity must . . . be careful not to accept as a commonly held rule what was in fact being constructed as a polemical tool."<sup>45</sup>

With the concluding twenty-one chapters of *Concerning the Decrees*, Athanasius responds to the failure of scriptural interpretation to answer the questions posed by the council, he briefly defends the metaphysics of the new credal language of "the same substance," and he showcases extended quotations from Theognostus, Dionysius of Alexandria, and Origen that use the term "substance (οὐσία)" with his preferred valence. The reader is supposed to understand through Athanasius's presentation that an Orthodox patrimony stretching back nearly two centuries stands behind the seemingly unprecedented language of the Nicene Creed. The apparent novelty of the definition is a mirage. "It is in this same sense that those gathered in Nicaea decreed these terms. But let us now prove that they did not invent these things and manufacture them on their own, as these ones allege, but spoke what they received from those before them. So this excuse also will be snatched away from them."<sup>46</sup>

In *Concerning the Decrees*, Athanasius moves beyond his earlier position in which textual interpretation served as a check on and means of

<sup>44</sup> Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 99.      <sup>45</sup> Rebillard, "A New Style of Argument," 561.

<sup>46</sup> *Concerning the Decrees* 25.1–2. For his part, Augustine picks up on Athanasius's more mature position espoused in *Concerning the Decrees*, agreeing with his Donatist opponents in 411 CE that "we should without a doubt hold to that which we discover in scripture and reject the accusatory opinions of people to hold fast to the divine words, which cannot deceive." *Acts of the Council of Carthage in 411* 3.101. Text SC 194. Like Athanasius, Augustine was quick to distance himself from the interpretation of any one commentator while acceding to the authority of a more or less univocal tradition. (A "tradition" chosen for its relative lack of diversity, to be sure.) See Rebillard, "A New Style of Argument," 566.

falsifying heretical doctrines. Here he marshals evidence of an orthodox patrimony in order to create a paratext for the scripture in a way that justifies the language of the council, most importantly the term “of the same substance (ὁμοούσιος).”<sup>47</sup> He does this by offering calques on terms in scripture. For instance, he decrees that whenever the phrase “of the Father” refers to Jesus in a scriptural text, the reader should interpret *as if* it said “from the *substance* of the Father.”<sup>48</sup> Bart Ehrman’s 1993 monograph *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture* detailed editorial changes to the text of the New Testament in which late ancient scribes emended manuscripts to say what Orthodox readers knew them to mean. Already in the late 350s, however, Athanasius insisted that valid textual interpretation required an Orthodox corruption in the *reading* of scripture. His exposition of the Nicene Creed uses the rhetoric of scriptural interpretation and traditional authority to propose a radically new hermeneutic dogma, contriving an Orthodox patrimony for an utterly novel theological position and implementing a new scholarly method, along the way.

#### ATHANASIUS AND THE “CANON”

Around fifteen years after he wrote his first full defense of the work of Nicaea in *Concerning the Decrees*, Athanasius wrote a festal letter laying out the “canonized” texts which constituted the “divine writings that we have for salvation.”<sup>49</sup> Athanasius claims that he wrote the letter in response to the problem of “Melitians boasting about books that they

<sup>47</sup> Lewis Ayres is right to insist that the term itself is not fundamental to Athanasius’s theology, and that “we can only understand its role against the background of a set of other terms, images, and phrases taken by Athanasius himself to be at the heart of Christian belief.” Ayres, “Athanasius’s Initial Defense,” 339.

<sup>48</sup> See, for instance, 19.4.

<sup>49</sup> Athanasius, *Festal Letter* 39.71. The text is fragmentary, and extant in Greek and Coptic. Greek text Joannou, *Discipline générale antique*, 71–76. David Brakke points out that for Athanasius and many other Christian scholars in the fourth century, “canonical” texts are only a subset of a larger group of writings known as “scripture” (τὰς θείας γραφάς). Brakke, “Canon Formation and Social Conflict in Fourth-Century Egypt: Athanasius of Alexandria’s Thirty-Ninth ‘Festal Letter’,” 397. Translations of *Festal Letter* 39 are adapted from Brakke, *Athanasius and Asceticism*, 326–332. In my estimation, the so-called Muratorian fragment (first described by L. A. Muratori and the recipient of numerous studies since) is not likely to predate Athanasius’ 39th Festal letter. Claire K. Rothschild has recently made a plausible argument that the fragment itself is a fake, and includes a useful survey of the relevant scholarship. Rothschild, “The Muratorian Fragment as Roman Fake.”

call ‘apocryphal.’”<sup>50</sup> The letter was written on the heels of Athanasius’ fifth (and final) exile, and sent to clerics as instruction regarding the manner in which scripture is to be used in their communities – a matter that required the bishop’s intervention, apparently.

Two observations will prove useful at this juncture: first, the extent of books that Athanasius deems “useful” includes books that are not within his canon.<sup>51</sup> At least one of these scriptures, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, was useful enough that Athanasius quoted it approvingly alongside the *Letter of James* in *Concerning the Decrees*, intending thereby to prove the Orthodox patrimony of his message (4). Second, Athanasius’s refutations of Arius from the 310s and 320s don’t evidence any confusion as to what group of texts are considered authoritative by all disputants involved; there is merely a dispute about how various statements in those texts are to be subordinated to one another. That is to say, already fifty years before Athanasius’s 39th *Festal Letter*, Christian theologians knew what constituted the “canon within the canon,” or passages and books of scripture that hold greater or lesser weight than others. The “canon” that Athanasius described in 367 is a corpus of quite a different sort; one that is permeable. There are books outside of the canon that are useful for newcomers, and books on the inside that are apparently not particularly useful for technical, elite theological debate.

This distinction helps me get at something central to the way that the Catholic scholars of the mid-fourth century interpreted text. In the wake of the decrees of Nicaea, the struggle over orthodoxy moved away from finding authoritative statements of doctrine within scriptural texts and instead toward justifying the language of the council’s pronouncements with reference to scriptural texts. The “canon” that Athanasius describes in his 39th *Festal Letter* comprises texts that are capable of being brought as evidence to check a credal statement. But by the time that he “defined” the canon in 367, he was doing quite the opposite in his polemical and protreptic scholarship: he was using credal statements – and above all the Nicene Creed – as a paratext and necessary precondition for authoritative interpretations of canonized scripture. The paratext that he offered had become the text.

<sup>50</sup> Text CSCO 150. I have written elsewhere about the various distortions read into this letter by presuming that forged texts are mainly at issue. Letteney, “Authenticity and Authority: The Case for Dismantling a Dubious Correlation,” 44–47 and 53n45.

<sup>51</sup> Athanasius, *Festal Letter* 39.75. Theodore Zahn’s discussion of this passage, and the relationship of these seven books to both the “canonized” and the “apocrypha” remains eminently useful. Zahn, *Athanasius und der Bibelkanon*, 26–29.



This movement from paratext to text served to “canonize” not a particular set of scriptures, which had effectively already been done by the 320s at the latest, but rather to authorize a set of technical calques on scripture that govern its Orthodox interpretation. In the years after writing *Concerning the Decrees*, Athanasius regularly reaffirmed the apparently paradoxical position that all canonical texts were equally scripture, but that there was nevertheless a necessary, pre-textual understanding that served to guide any reading – and especially the reading of seemingly contradictory passages. For instance, in his *Letters to Serapion*, written during the course of his third exile (perhaps around 360) and thus at around the time that he composed *Concerning the Decrees*, Athanasius wrote:

They use what is written in the book of Proverbs, “The Lord created me (Κύριος ἔκτισέ με) as a beginning of his ways for his works” as a pretext for stating, “Look! He was created: he is a created being (κτίσμα ἐστίν).” For this reason it is necessary to demonstrate how far they go astray by not knowing the scope (τὸν σκοπὸν) of divine scripture.<sup>52</sup> For if he is a son, let it not be said that he is a created being. But if he is a creature, let him not be called a son. I demonstrated above what a vast difference there is between a “created being” and a “son.” Furthermore, baptism is not validated by the words “into creator and created (εἰς κτίστην καὶ κτίσμα),” but “into father and son (εἰς πατέρα καὶ υἱόν),” so he must not be called “created being” but “son the lord.” They say “Is it not written?” Of course it is written, as much must be admitted! But the heretics have a poor understanding of a good statement. For if they knew and understood the distinctive character of Christianity (τὸν χαρακτήρα τοῦ Χριστιανισμοῦ), they would not have called the Lord of glory a created being, nor would they find difficulty in what is written well.<sup>53</sup>

The “distinctive character of Christianity” for Athanasius is pre-textual; interpreters must know the Orthodox tradition of interpretation in order to produce trustworthy knowledge. Part of that patrimony is to know that even when scripture says “the Lord created me,” the “me” that “was created” (ἐκτίσθη) is not “a created being” (κτίσμα). The semantic point may seem nonsensical, but for Athanasius, the Christological point stands.

Here we see that Athanasius is indebted to scholastic positions traceable to both Irenaeus and Tertullian. His definition of Orthodoxy stands

<sup>52</sup> On the “scope (ὁ σκοπός)” in Athanasius see Ernest, “Athanasius of Alexandria: The Scope of Scripture in Polemical and Pastoral Context.” My translation is adapted from his. Text *PG* 26.620a.

<sup>53</sup> *Letters to Serapion* 2.7. Text *AW*, 449–600.

in the gap between the two, and exploits strengths from each system, even though they are fundamentally incompatible. As I demonstrated in Chapter 2, Tertullian did not see scripture as a repository for truth, and held that its proper interpretation required assent to the *regula fidei*. In order to understand what scripture says, in other words, the exegete must already know what scripture means: for Tertullian this knowledge was the 116 words of the *regula fidei*, and for an older Athanasius, it was the Creed of Nicaea. But Athanasius also inherited a position from Irenaeus which Tertullian fundamentally rejected. Namely, Athanasius holds to the idea that truth is fractal: if the seeker is equipped with the right tools and hermeneutic strategies, truth can be continuously refined and examined to ever greater precision. For Irenaeus and Athanasius alike the question of the relationship between the Father and the Son is discoverable, and even while theological knowledge is progressively refined the nature of the message remains singular.

#### CONCERNING THE DECREES

A newly minted theological method crystallized in and through Athanasius's scholarly work. In *Concerning the Decrees*, Athanasius argues that an authoritative text has been distilled into the language of Nicaea and that the language of the distillate must be imposed as the authoritative framework for all subsequent reading. Credal language was reimposed on the authoritative text itself, rendering the words of scripture a simulacrum. Scriptural interpretation had become epistemically subsequent and methodologically ancillary. Through his polemics Athanasius achieved the irony of ironies: scriptural interpretation put itself out of business.<sup>54</sup>

*Concerning the Decrees* aims to construct a patrimony for the language of Nicaea and to justify the use of nonscriptural terms within a creed that claims to distill the language of scripture into an authoritative statement. Athanasius's treatise includes a section of significant quotations of previous theological thinkers who use the "substance" language to speak of the relationship of the son to the father. He ends this section: "See, we are proving that this view has been transmitted to you from father to father. But you – latter-day Jews and disciples of Caiaphas – how many fathers can you assign to your phrases?" (27.4).

<sup>54</sup> Aloys Grillmeier has a more generous read on the situation, but structurally his understanding is the same as my own. Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, 2.1.20.

In *Concerning the Decrees*, Athanasius extensively cites previous authorities to demonstrate patrimony for the Nicene “substance” language, modeling a form of aggregation that would become the scholarly norm in decades to come. But the material form of Athanasius’s text also models a new scholastic method based in aggregation. His work was not solely a Christological treatise, it was the cover letter for a dossier. Athanasius appended a number of primary sources to the methodological exposition that we call *Concerning the Decrees*, beginning the text that was his main polemical adversary: Eusebius of Caesarea’s *Letter to the Caesareans*.<sup>55</sup> A valid demonstration of theological truth, in Athanasius’ estimation, required first the sublimation of scripture to its distillate, along with a demonstration of the Orthodox patrimony of one’s ideas. But truly valid scholarship required one more step, as well: the aggregation of polemical referents, along with any material supporting or otherwise relevant to the question at hand. I argue that Athanasius’ creative work in treatises such as *Concerning the Decrees* set the standard for the production of valid theological knowledge.

It is precisely in this period, and in these letters, that Athanasius forged the polemical use of Nicene language, and it is only in the later fourth century that “Nicaea’s terminology gradually comes to be equated with Nicaea’s judgments.”<sup>56</sup> Athanasius’s polemic was predicated on the failure of scriptural interpretation and the need to contrive an authoritative patrimony of unified, Orthodox voices in order to justify his own attachment to novel, nonscriptural language, and in order to respond to criticism that seemed to be coming at him from all sides.

The period between 350 and 367 was the most prolific of Athanasius’s life. In these years he forged not only a new mode of argumentation but also a literary reputation that led to his outsized influence on Nicene theological scholarship, and to his eventual canonization. Timothy Barnes lamented:

Were Athanasius a different type of man or writer, or had he not been an outlaw, it might have been possible to chart in his writings the changes of ecclesiastical alliances and to follow the moods of the eastern church in the tumultuous years between 357 and 360. For the most part, however, the exiled Athanasius of these years looked backward in bitterness rather than forward and ruminated on the

<sup>55</sup> *Urk.* 22. Preserved as part of the textual tradition of *Concerning the Decrees*, and also in the *Ecclesiastical History* of Socrates (1.8.35) and that of Theodoret (1.12.1).

<sup>56</sup> Ayres, “Athanasius’s Initial Defense,” 346.

grievances of the past in order to explain (and discredit) the persecution of the present.<sup>57</sup>

While I cannot chart with a Barnesian granularity the comings and goings of Athanasius during his most prolific period, I can say something about the work that he produced while he was on the lam: Athanasius's constant rumination on the past, looking grievously backward on the Council of Nicaea and all of the perceived slights in the intervening years, shaped not only the Athanasius that was in exile but the Athanasius who was remembered in the Theodosian court as a "pillar of the church." There may be no more consequential sense of bereavement in the history of the book than what is visible in the literature, and the structure of argumentation, that crystallized during the years when Athanasius first became a formidable literary figure. Athanasius's dogged defense of the language and theology of Nicaea during this period set the standard for Christian theological disputation in the years that followed. His scholastic method quickly became customary.

Theologians defending the Nicene Creed were not the only polemicists who employed the method for which Athanasius's *Concerning the Decrees* is our clearest example. There was an explosion of credal creation in the fourth century, on all sides of the debate, utilizing the same scholastic method of (1) aggregation of a scholastic patrimony, (2) distillation of the patrimony into a creed, and (3) sublimation of further dispute to the newly minted creed. The spate of creeds recorded in Athanasius's *Concerning the Councils* in the early 360s – nearly a dozen – all reflect this same scholarly practice even when making opposite substantive claims. Add to this the fourth-century creeds extant in the later works of Socrates, Hilary, Theodoret, Epiphanius, and the various late ancient and early medieval collections, and it becomes clear that this method, which was created in defense of the Nicene Creed, quickly took over as the gold standard of scholastic methodology in fourth-century theological disputation, at least among theologians claiming Catholic identity.

Within seventy years the argumentative format that Athanasius pioneered in *Concerning the Decrees*, and reflected in the flurry of credal disputation in the 340s, 350s, and 360s, was wholly naturalized for theological disputation. In 434, Vincent of Lérins wrote matter-of-factly about the proper production of theological truth:

<sup>57</sup> Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius*, 122.

“What then will a Catholic Christian do if a small portion of the Church has cut itself off from the communion of the universal faith?” . . . Then by all means it will be his charge to prefer the decrees of an ancient universal council, if there are any, to the rashness or ignorance of a few. “But what if some error arises on which no such decree is relevant?” Then he must collate and consult and interrogate the opinions of the ancients who, though living in various times and places, nevertheless remained in the communion and faith of the one Catholic Church, and appeared as commendable guides.<sup>58</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

Athanasius’s work reflected and eventually catalyzed a shift across the domain of fourth-century theological scholarship, at least within the group of theologians disputing the legacy of Nicaea. He and his opponents agreed that the ultimate arbiters of truth were credal statements that had been distilled from authoritative archives, but that it was not sufficient simply to report the distillation of truth. 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. In the early years of the Theodosian dynasty this mode of argumentation came to be the standard scholarly tactic for knowledge production – first in theological domains, and then everywhere. Pitched and often violent battles over Nicene orthodoxy during Athanasius’s lifetime set the stage for a new kind of scholastic tribalism in which Nicene Christians insisted that a scholastic method, born of polemic, was both true and universal.

It is no secret that the Theodosian dynasty was vehemently Nicene, and that the greatest influx of Christians into the ruling elite of Rome – the Old Rome and the New – occurred not under Constantine’s auspices but under Theodosius’s.<sup>59</sup> The tenacity with which Theodosian dynasts

<sup>58</sup> Vincent of Lerins, *Commonitorium* 3.4 Text CCL 64:150. Discussed in Rebillard, “A New Style of Argument,” 560; also in Vessey “Peregrinus against the Heretics: Classicism, Provinciality and the Place of the Alien Writer in Late Roman Gaul.”

<sup>59</sup> Theodosius I was famously violent. See, for instance, the account in Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 7.25 of the Nicene emperor’s massacre of a large, predetermined number of randomly selected victims in retribution for the murder of one of his generals. Sozomen recounts the story of a father who successfully convinced soldiers to trade his own life for one of his sons. The soldiers, in Sozomen’s words, replied that they could not accept a bribe to kill one person in lieu of two “because doing so would fail to attain the number” of victims required by the emperor (7.25.5–6). The parallels to Hitler’s massacre at Fosse Ardeatine are striking and chilling, and the incident was not unique: Theodosius

patronized Nicene Christianity is evidenced not only in the building of churches, the elevation of senators, or the changing social mores regarding sex, family life, and Traditionalist worship. Even in the structure, motivations, execution, and reception of “secular” Theodosian scholastic productions we can trace a new scholarly method, born of the Nicene controversy.

By way of analogy, let’s engage with the judicial legacy of Antonin Scalia, the instigator and popularizer of a novel form of jurisprudence dubbed “originalism.” Imagine that Antonin Scalia served fifty years on the Supreme Court under a single president who packed the courts with originalist judges: jurists who take up Scalia’s scholastic method even when they disagree with his opinions. Twenty or thirty years later, it would not be terribly surprising if the “originalist” manner of argumentation found its way into new domains that have nothing to do with law.<sup>60</sup> In such a world, “originalist philosophy,” or “originalist history,” or even “originalist journalism” might not seem so strange. Similarly, during the Theodosian dynasty, a powerful patronage system led a set of scholastic practices born of theological controversy to become embedded in the broader society. I argue that these practices are visible in Theodosian productions ranging from theological tractates to legal codifications to the *Palestinian Talmud*. In this sense, “Christianization” exists in practices. Even when Athanasius’s opponents disagreed with his theological claims, they mirrored back his argumentative method. As I argue in Chapter 5, even when some influential scholastic productions of the

I reportedly ordered the indiscriminate slaughter of some 7,000 people in Thessaloniki as retribution for the stoning of local magistrates. Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.17. Bloodthirst apparently ran in the family: Ammianus Marcellinus reports that during the so-called Firmus war (on which see Shaw, *Sacred Violence: African Christians and Sectarian Hatred in the Age of Augustine*, 38–46), Theodosius’s father ordered the rebellious Constantinian Infantry “killed in the old-fashioned way,” while the Fourth Cohort of Mounted Archers were subjected to killing except for their leaders, whose right hands were ritually severed. Ammianus Marcellinus, *History* 29.5.22.

<sup>60</sup> In fact, there is a strong case to be made that the advent of judicial originalism was precisely the result of a fundamentalist shift in biblical interpretation among American Christians first, which proliferated in structure through the courts. Constitutional interpretation only came to have the structure of scriptural interpretation as a result of Scalia’s pioneering work, and the widespread patronage of originalist judges by the Federalist Society beginning in the 1980s. Two useful studies on this question have been published, one from legal scholars and one from a historian of medieval Christianity. They are, respectively, Smith and Tuttle, “Biblical Literalism and Constitutional Originalism”; and Pelikan, *Interpreting the Bible and the Constitution*.

Theodosian Age reject or are ambivalent to Christian theological propositions, nevertheless we can see the effect of Christian scholastic methods in their form, content, and stated intentions. I turn now to the “rise of the code,” and to the changing shape of scholarship across the ideological spectrum during the Theodosian Age.