RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE IN ANTIQUITY:

A RELIGIOUS STUDIES APPROACH ACROSS THE LONGUE DURÉE

THURSDAY, 28 SEPTEMBER – SATURDAY 30 SEPTEMBER 2017

ABSTRACTS

KEYNOTE LECTURE # 1
Priests, Pogroms and Persecutions:
Religious Violence in Antiquity across the longue durée

Jan N. Bremmer (University of Groningen)

In my lecture I will start by asking what we mean by religious violence, whether monotheism is more violent than polytheism, and since when the term ‘religious violence’ can be found and has become popular. I will then proceed to ancient Greece, where I will discuss the cases of Socrates and Phryne, people who were (nearly) executed because of their religious views and/or actions. I will ask who charged them of impiety and why. Next I will look at what is called ‘the first pogrom’, a clash between Jews and Greeks in Alexandria in 38 CE, and wonder whether the use of the term pogrom is justified in this case. I continue with the Roman persecution of the Christians and look into the various kinds of violence, also distinguishing between the impact of local and national persecutions. My final topic is a case of largely imaginary Christian religious violence, but which shows the changed relations of power since the emperors became Christian. I conclude by looking back at this near-millennium of religious violence, ask what has changed over the centuries and try to answer the question whether we should speak of religious violence or of a connection between violence and religion.

KEYNOTE LECTURE # 2
Defending God’s Own Community:
Violent Scripts of Contemporary Religious Communities

Hans G. Kippenberg (Jacobs University Bremen)

The lecture addresses violence in the context of the formation and preservation of a religious community. It starts with the thesis by Jan Assmann, that ancient Jewish monotheism entailed a violent language, but only justified violent acts against apostates. A major biblical example is the zeal of Phinehas killing a fellow-believer who entertained a sexual relationship with and an idolatrous woman. Phinehas earned eternal priesthood for this deed both for himself and his descendants. Later zealots invoked this model in their fight against Hellenistic rulers and their attempt to change the egalitarian Jewish constitution into an aristocratic pagan one. The zealots justified their violence by defining the situation
as violating the covenant with God. Hans Blumenberg called the biblical example a ‘prefiguration’ that secured God’s assistance in precarious situations of the fight against idolatry. The pattern turned out to be recurrent and inspired later Christians during the Crusades – in agreement with Stephen Greenblatt’s theory of ‘cultural mobility’.

In modern times the biblical prefiguration shaped the violence of ultraorthodox settlers in the occupied territories or – as they call it – the biblical land of Samaria and Judaea. Nevertheless, the relation between religion and violence is neither necessary (‘religion is inherently violent’) nor impossible (‘religion is inherently peaceful and only when manipulated violent’): a relation between both is contingent and possible. Peaceful relations between Jews and non-Jews, recorded in the Bible and rabbinical literature, inspire present peace movements in Israel/Palestine, which are composed of Jews and Palestinians fighting together for justice.

Since the 1970s we are confronted with succeeding religious movements fighting on a global scale against political dependence on Western powers and their liberal culture of secularization. This message is spread globally by electronic media. The end of my paper sets forth some methodological rules, when studying religious violence in terms of social action.

**Mobility, Migrants, Religious Violence? The View from Roman Italy (First-Third Centuries CE)**

Andreas Bendlin (University of Toronto)

My contribution is set within a broader inquiry that assesses the degree to which acts of violence committed against migrants, foreigners and, more generally, marginal groups in the Roman world may be ascribed to ‘religious’ motivations (broadly defined), and hence may be called ‘religious violence’. Against this background, in my paper I discuss discourses of marginalization and instances of – verbal as well as physical – violence against migrant groups, in particular the Judaean migrant populations, in Flavian and Trajanic Italy. I hold that Roman discourses of marginalization are concomitant with the Roman legal marginalization of diasporic groups and their religious practices, that they often identify a ‘religious’ element, and moreover, that ‘religious’ motivations were an important factor in the perpetration of violence – both spontaneous and state-sourced – against marginalized groups such as the Jews of Rome and Italy.

Current scholarly narratives are often underpinned by the model of predominantly consensual ‘cohabitation’ of cults and religions in a pluralistic Empire; if conflict occurs, it is attributed to underlying ethnic, political, or economic causes. I propose that this way of thinking has its disadvantages. An investigation of the semantics of Roman imperial society points to the widespread existence of – cataclysmic as well as systemic – violence, which could be argued in explicitly religious terms long before Late Antiquity. Although these ‘religious’ semantics may have masked other motivations, we have yet to come to terms with the fact that these very semantics determined social reality for the perpetrators and the victims of violence alike.
The Legacy of Constantine’s Image as God’s Warrior

Elisabeth DePalma Digeser (University of California, Santa Barbara)

In Western Europe, two rhetors constructed an image of the Emperor Constantine as God’s warrior. One, the anonymous author of the Latin Panegyric of 310 CE, presented the emperor as the incarnation of the unconquered sun; the other, the emperor’s courtier, Lactantius, cast the emperor as the embodiment of the returning Christ, avenging Christians martyred during the Great Persecution (303-311) with the sword of justice. This paper will first explore the resonance of these ideas in early fourth-century Gallia Belgica, a region home to both a major Apolline pilgrimage site and a strong Christian apocalyptic tradition. It was also a stronghold of Mithraism – both in the towns and among the army – a tradition whose narratives extolled the sun god Mithras’ vanquishing the evil of darkness (often represented as a beast on their reliefs). It will then assess the extent to which this image colored the representation of Gallic kings from Clovis to Charlemagne.

Crowd Behaviour
and the Destruction of the Serapeum at Alexandria in 391/392 CE

Jitse H.F. Dijkstra (University of Ottawa)

The destruction of the famous temple of Serapis at Alexandria in 391 or 392 CE is one of the most iconic events in Late Antique history. Yet, even though there are no less than five accounts by the Church historians Rufinus, Socrates, Sozomen and Theodoret as well as the sophist Eunapius written within slightly more than half a century of the event, they contradict each other in several important points, which makes it hard to reconstruct what exactly happened. Rather than piecing together details from the various accounts into one master narrative, as has been done in the past, this paper will concentrate on the longest and earliest account, the one by Rufinus. Despite the clear rhetorical overtones of Rufinus’ version, we will argue that it still contains several trustworthy elements that allow for a general reconstruction of the events. We will also take recourse to modern sociological theories of crowd behaviour in order to shed further light on how the events unfolded.

Ancient Greek Binding Spells and (Political) Violence

Esther Eidinow (University of Bristol)

This paper starts from the question of why, if curse tablets (katadesmoi) were fundamentally a practice of competitive contexts, as scholars have argued, the material record indicates their early use was primarily not for sporting events, but in political settings, such as the law courts. This paper suggests that these early binding spells should be considered primarily as political instruments, which treated the body of the individual as a site of domination.
Starting from Michael Taussig’s insights on the ways that ‘societies live by fictions taken as reality’, this paper focuses on the imagined violence against the individual depicted in these curses, examining the cultural significance of the spectacle of the fragmented body. Importantly, alongside the physical targets (hands, feet, etc.), this conceptualisation of the political body included the intentionality of the victims: a number of these spells also bind various representations of the mind or will of the victim, including *nous* and *phren*. This paper examines how these spells, and their focus on body and mind, expressed and co-created a conception of the individual as political actor, and explores what it means for our understanding of ‘subjectivation’ in ancient Greek, especially Athenian, culture.

**Fighting for Chalcedon:**
**Vitalian’s Rebellion against Anastasius**

Hugh Elton (Trent University)

The Roman general Vitalian revolted against the Emperor Anastasius (491-518) in Thrace in 513, at least partly motivated by Anastasius’ anti-Chalcedonian policies. During subsequent negotiations, Anastasius promised that the Pope would be allowed to settle the religious concerns that Vitalian had. The negotiations broke down, but after some fighting in 514 Vitalian demanded that a Church council with western bishops be held at Heraclea near Constantinople. With Anastasius’ failure to organise the agreed upon council, Vitalian marched on Constantinople a third time in 515 where he was defeated. His readiness to lead Roman soldiers into battle against other Roman soldiers on behalf of orthodoxy marked a profound change in the way that late Roman generals acted with respect to religious affairs, becoming active participants in disputes rather than remaining as obedient imperial officials.

**The Emperor, the People and Urban Violence in the Sixth Century**

Geoffrey Greatrex (University of Ottawa)

This paper emphasises the numerous constraints on emperors in dealing with violence, often religious, in the fifth and sixth centuries. A brief overview of the extensive modern research on popular disturbances underlines the degree to which religious and factional violence overlap. Following Rene Pfeilschifter’s important work on the position of the emperor in Constantinople, I argue that the rising influence of both circus factions and Church leaders eroded his room for manoeuvre. As a result, crowds and individuals could exercise significant influence on the emperor, sometimes resulting in more intolerant policies than he had wished or was expedient. In sum, policy and persecutions were often driven more by popular than imperial initiative.
**Reality and Image:**
*Patterns of Imperial Communication and the Great Persecution*

Erika Manders (University of Nijmegen)

Only a limited number of coins (five out of 160 coin types) minted by the third-century persecutor of Christians Trajan Decius bears a religious theme. As I argued in earlier research, particularly my 2012 monograph, this calls into question the existence of an all-encompassing religious policy of the emperor. In this paper, the investigation of Decius’ coins will be extended to the coins of the emperors who took part in another imperially organized persecution of Christians: the Great Persecution. Does a systematic analysis of iconographical patterns on Tetrarchic coins also have implications for the interpretation of the imperial persecutions between 303 and 311? Investigation of imperial representation on Tetrarchic coins places the imperial actions targeted at the Christians between 303 and 311 in a new, broader ideological context.

**Religious Violence?**
*Two Massacres on a Sabbath in Jerusalem and Caesarea*

Steve Mason (University of Groningen)

In the second volume of his *Judaean War* (2.450–60) Josephus tells the story of two large massacres. They occur on the same day, a sabbath, by some ‘otherworldly providence’. One, committed by the residents of Jerusalem, is the slaughter of the Roman garrison there, auxiliary soldiers who have been harassing the Judaeans mercilessly. On the very same day, Josephus claims, the residents of Caesarea destroyed their Judaean minority – again after long-simmering tensions over status and rights.

Although the climactic events are briefly related, the simultaneous massacres both conclude problems long in development and also lay the foundation for war with Rome. The killing of the garrison could not go unanswered by the imperial power, and Judaean retaliation for Caesarea throughout southern Syria gave a harshly punitive edge to the expedition of the Roman legate, setting the war in train.

While setting both incidents in their literary and historical contexts, I shall use them to probe two larger issues: (a) the need for fine-grained and particular historical research, to qualify large-canvas claims about, for example, Judaean revolt against the imperial power; (b) criteria for defining ‘religious’ (as distinct from political and ethnic) violence, especially in Antiquity.
Religious Violence in Late Antiquity: What Is It? Did It Exist? Can We Make Sense of It?

Wendy Mayer (Australian Lutheran College)

If there is one thing that has become clear as a result of the multitude of conversations and debates occurring across the disciplines in recent years it is that the phenomenon we label ‘religious violence’ is far from simple. This holds as true for its existence and expression within the ancient to late-ancient worlds as it does for its expression globally in the present. Late Antiquity is typically defined by the triumph of one religion (Christianity) over many, by the coalescence of politics and religion, by the triumph of monotheism over polytheism, and as a period when the free religious marketplace was monopolised and the prevailing paradigm of religious competition shifted towards one of religious conflict. The Roman imperial world is held to have shifted from a mood of tolerance to intolerance. Violence is viewed as a by-product of these changes. Recently, there has been push-back by scholars who question a number of the assumptions that inform this point of view. The causal role of religion in violence has been contested, as has the existence of religion in its modern sense (as an organised system of belief and worship). Rhetorical claims of violence and persecution are continually being deconstructed and challenged via adduction of material evidence and the archaeological record. These approaches have resulted in their own conflict within the scholarly community with claims and counter-claims that scholars have been too trusting of or sceptical towards the written record.

What we will do in this paper is to contextualise discussion on religious violence on this second day of the workshop by outlining some of the current debates with regard to the world of Late Antiquity. In the process we will introduce some of the challenges posed by our own exploration of explanatory models from the neurosciences. A key challenge we face, we will suggest, is not just whether there is comparability between the late-ancient past and the global present or whether in any historical period there is a causal relationship between religion and violence, but whether we can make any sense of the relationship between narratives of violence (which in Late Antiquity were prolific) and actual violent action.

Coercion in Late Antiquity: A Brief Intellectual History

Peter van Nuffelen

Scholarship on religious violence usually fails to reflect about the categories with which the phenomenon is identified and described. This paper focuses on one particular concept, coercion, and traces how it was conceptualised in Late Antiquity. It proposes, first, that coercion is conceived of as an ineffective instrument when persuasion fails due to a lack of openness of the interlocutor, and, second, that the relationship between persuasion and coercion was understood in terms borrowed from the pedagogical thinking of classical philosophy. Indeed,
Late Antique thought about religious coercion (Christian and non-Christian) has its intellectual roots in ancient philosophy. Besides tracing this origin, this paper also revisits Augustine’s justification of state coercion against the Donatists, showing that the problem was not the use of coercion but the permission given to the state to exercise coercion within an ecclesiastical context.

**Perceptions et représentations de la violence dans la littérature scripturale, canonique et apocryphe, des origines chrétiennes**

Pierluigi Piovanelli (Université d’Ottawa)

Des perceptions d’une violence d’origine humaine subie de l’extérieur (infligée par des adversaires, par une majorité hostile, voire par des forces ennemies), auxquelles on répond par des représentations d’une justice réparatrice divine annoncée comme imminente, sont au cœur de plusieurs oracles du prophétisme israélite classique et de son héritier, l’apocalyptique juive de l’époque du Second Temple. Dans notre contribution, nous allons analyser la réaction « chrétienne » à la violence de la destruction de Jérusalem, en 70 de notre ère, consignée dans la « petite apocalypse synoptique » et dans l’Apocalypse johannique. Une telle attitude, qui trouve son pendant dans les textes apocalyptiques juifs contemporains (notamment, 4 Esdras et 2 Baruch) et qui démontre éloquemment la sensibilité juive des premiers narrateurs « chrétiens », ne sera modifiée que dans l’Apocalypse de Pierre et la littérature postérieure à l’insurrection de Bar Kokhba à la suite d’une reconfiguration significative des perceptions et représentations de cette même violence.

**Chasser les cultes égyptiens et les astrologues de Rome – répression et violence**

Christian Raschle (Université de Montréal)

Les techniques de divination astrologiques et les cultes isiaques ressemblent à nous modernes comme des pratiques religieuses de l’espace privé qui ne touchent guère la sphère publique dans la Rome antique. Cependant les autorités romaines ont expulsé à plusieurs reprises des pratiquants de ces cultes et techniques. Dans ma contribution je poserai d’abord la question de quelle manière le terme « violence religieuse » est approprié à la lumière des sources littéraires concernant ces expulsions et de la tradition juridique romaine. Deuxièmement j’explorerai le champ sémantique de la « purification » de l’espace religieux public qui est toujours lié à ces expulsions. En conclusion j’insisterai sur le rôle politique ponctuel de ces expulsions en ce qui concerne la mainmise sur la vie publique de Rome par les empereurs qui doivent négocier chaque étape même dans le champ religieux.
Animal Sacrifice and the Roman Persecution of Christians (Second-Third Centuries CE)

James Rives (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill)

In this paper I analyze the role played by animal sacrifice in the Roman persecution of Christians, from both the Roman and the Christian side. I first survey the role of animal sacrifice in Roman trials of Christians, arguing that up to the mid-third century CE it had no distinctive significance for either side. The turning point was the Emperor Decius’ decree that required all inhabitants of the empire to participate in an animal sacrifice, which endowed animal sacrifice with a distinctive prominence. I then trace the development of Christian rejection of sacrifice, which although initially contingent hardened into a strong ideological position. Lastly, I argue that Decius’ decree resulted in an increasing insistence on the part of Christian leaders that animal sacrifice was fundamentally incompatible with Christian identity.

Spinning Violence: Narrating the Persecution of Early anti-Chalcedonian Saints

Christine Shepardson (University of Tennessee)

While sixth-century Christians continued to celebrate early martyrs, they also inherited a post-Constantinian narrative that understood the Christian emperor to be in power through the will of God, an understanding that complicated the position of Christians who rejected imperial orthodoxy. Christian monks and bishops who denounced the Council of Chalcedon (451) thus faced the challenge of how to legitimate their claims to orthodoxy in the face of imperial rejection and sporadic persecution. This essay will reveal two complementary rhetorical strategies that John Rufus (floruit 500-518) and John of Ephesus (died 588/589) used to navigate this complex relationship of anti-Chalcedonian Christians to suffering and persecution. On the one hand, their stories countered the presumption that persecution suggested God’s rejection by emphasizing that anti-Chalcedonian saints were often divinely protected, and that what suffering did take place was foretold and rewarded by God. On the other hand, other stories exaggerated the appearance of anti-Chalcedonian suffering by conflating self-imposed ascetic contests alongside imperial violence, allowing the authors to stress anti-Chalcedonian claims to inherit the true Christianity of the martyrs. Recognizing these rhetorical strategies offers a new perspective on interpreting narratives of religious violence in antiquity and highlights the potential benefits that these strategies provided for their authors.
Justifications de la violence religieuse
dans la doctrine du monachisme primitif
(IVe-Ve siècle)

Fabrizio Vecoli (Université de Montréal)

Le monachisme primitif se conçoit comme un régime de vie qui s'efforce de vivre de la manière la plus pleine possible l'exemplum fourni par les écritures chrétiennes, en particulier celui de la personne du Christ. Il peut ainsi paraître paradoxale que ces mêmes moines, qui font du retrait du monde et du renoncement à une volonté propre leur choix de vie, puissent être si souvent impliqués dans des conflits à caractère religieux ainsi que dans leurs dégénérations en violence exercée sur les lieux et les personnes. Certes, on trouvera de ces faits maintes raisons d'ordre idiographique (le particularisme de l'histoire), mais l'intérêt d'une lecture plus vaste de ce phénomène – impliquant donc un certain degré de comparaison – consiste à rechercher les raisons ancrées dans les conceptions ascétiques et spirituelles propres aux milieux monastiques. Jadis, le spécialiste Antoine Guillaumont s'était interrogé sur les « raisons ontologiques et protologiques » de l'ascèse monastique : il serait intéressant de reformuler cette question pour traiter du problème de la violence religieuse.

Asceticism, Religious Violence, and Monastic Curses
in Theodoret’s Historia Religiosa

Chris L. de Wet (University of South Africa)

The religious context of Late Antique Syria was varied, to say the least. Along with the different religions that characterized the region, there were numerous Christian movements that were in many instances at odds with one another. The common denominator between most of the varieties of Christianity in Late Antique Syria was monasticism. Several authors have compiled vitae of the Syrian monks of their region and particular stream of Christianity. Characteristic among many of the vitae are the conflicts between monks and clergy of opposing religious groups, or between monks and members of the rich ruling classes. In the narratives, the conflicts often turn violent in a specific way – the protagonist monk curses his opponent, which often ends with the extremely graphic and violent demise of the opponent. The fate of the opponents is frequently described in disciplinary and punitive terms. This paper investigates the nature, function, and implications of the supernatural literary violence of the monastic curses in the vitae of Late Antique Syrian monks. Curses will be compared with one another, as well as with magical/religious cursing outside of Christianity. It will be asked what effect such literary depictions may have had on actual violence, and vice versa. The paper, more generally, investigates the complex relationship between literary (and fictional) religious violence and actual religious violence.