RELEIGIOUS 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 Antiquity, violence as a means to eliminate people with different religious views seems to have originated in classical Greece and, subsequently, was especially practised and developed by the Romans until the Christians became the dominant political group and started to suppress paganism in various, sometimes violent, ways. In my lecture, I will take a longue durée perspective and discuss the definition of religious violence, violence in monotheism and polytheism, the nature of the violence applied and the differences in religious violence of the Jews, Greeks, Romans and Christians by zooming in on various religious conflicts.

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

Hans G. Kippenberg (Jacobs University Bremen)

This lecture addresses religious violence in the context of community formation. Ancient Jewish monotheism already contained the promise of Israel’s liberation from bondage and slavery. When the Jewish community was threatened by Hellenism it fought jealously for its freedom by emulating Pinehas who once fought for Israel’s purity and its covenant with God by killing an Israelite who entertained sexual relations with a pagan woman during the Exodus. He earned eternal priesthood for this deed.

The issue of religious violence rooted in messianic expectations returned in the confessional wars in 16th- and 17th-century Europe and became a subject of modern Western reflection. Hobbes and later on Schmitt proposed to restrict religion to the private sphere and to neutralize the messianic promise of liberation and freedom.

Since the seventies of the 20th century we are confronted with succeeding religious movements fighting on a global scale against political dependence on Western powers and its culture of secularization. The lecture deals with their understanding of this dependence in terms of a threat to their community; with
the performance of their struggle by emulating religious models; and with the spread of the message of this fight by global electronic media.

**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 attempts to assess the degree to which prejudices and acts of violence committed against migrants, foreigners and similar marginal groups in the ancient metropolis may be ascribed to ‘religious’ motivations (broadly defined), and hence can be called ‘religious violence’. Before this background and with a particular focus on Rome and Italy in the Flavian period, in my paper I discuss Roman discourses of marginalization and conflict relating to migrant groups (prominently including Judaean migrant populations). These discourses, at least as voiced by the social agents themselves, identify a ‘religious’ element and thereby sometimes mask other causes and motives (ethnic, political, or economic). An investigation of the semantics of Roman imperial society suggests that such ‘religious’ motivations were one important factor in the imperial-period perpetration of prejudice and violence – both spontaneous and state-sourced – against migrants or otherwise marginalized groups such as the Jews of Rome and Italy.

**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: Vitalic’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 will return to a topic I first discussed twenty years ago in an article for the *Journal of Hellenic Studies* in 1997. There I focused on the Nika riot and factional violence in general in Late Antiquity. In this paper I intend to shift my focus to religious violence in the same period in order to ascertain to what degree it overlaps with and is connected to the factions. I hope to show that religious violence, particularly between supporters and adversaries of Chalcedon, was often the result of popular passions rather than imperial direction.

**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 Judeans 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.
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 scripturaire, canonique et apocryphe, des origines chrétiennes

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 oracle s du prophétisme israélite classique et de son héritière, 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

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 chart the changing reasons why Roman authorities required Christians to sacrifice: at first merely as confirmation of an individual’s claim not to be a Christian, but increasingly as an end in itself. The turning point was the Emperor Decius’ decree that required all inhabitants of the empire to participate in an animal sacrifice. In the second part I trace the development of Christian rejection of sacrifice: its displacement by the sacrificial interpretation of Jesus’ death and its reinterpretation as sustenance for evil demons. 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.