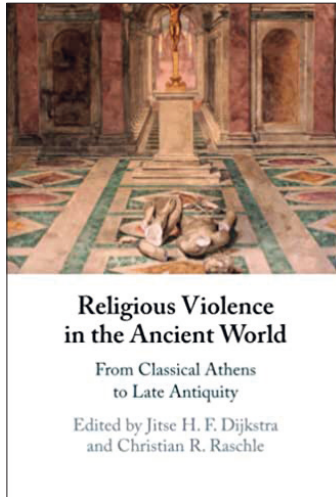


RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE IN THE ANCIENT WORLD



DIJKSTRA, JITSE H.F. & RASCHLE, CHRISTIAN R. (eds.) (2020). *Religious Violence in the Ancient World. From Classical Athens to Late Antiquity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, xiv 432 pp., 110,12 € [ISBN: 978-1-1084-9490-8].

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AT THE 2014 ANNUAL MEETING OF THE CLASSICAL ASSOCIATION OF CANADA, scholars from a variety of Antiquity-related fields – biblical and classical studies, history of religions, and religious studies – planned a follow-up workshop on violence and religion in Antiquity. Three years later, under the sponsorship of the Université de Montréal and the University of Ottawa, the workshop brought together scholars with expertise in Greco-Roman religion and early Christianity, and on the docket was the topic of religious violence. Three years after that, this publication appeared.

This impressive volume is comprised of 17 excellent essays that for all of their diversity in the particularities of topic and subject matter make a strong case for a

religion studies approach to the topic of religious violence in the ancient Western world. Taken as a whole, the volume challenges two central ideas: first, the claim that polytheism was necessarily more tolerant and thus less violent than monotheistic religion in this time period, and secondly the assumption that religious violence was pronounced, isolatable, and everywhere present in the ancient world. Aside from the lack of an independent meaning, even a word for “religion” in antiquity, authors in this volume seem in general agreement that it is a fallacy to think that a religious causality for violence can be extracted as an independent variable to explain violence involving religion. Instances of violence in antiquity, while often including religion or what modern scholars would recognize as religion, necessarily involve causal complexity with politics, economics, social stratification, class, slavery and cultural developments adding to the ferment to demonstrate as Jan Bremmer notes insightfully, that “in Antiquity not all religious violence was that religious and not all religious violence that violent” (p. 68).

The book is divided into three sections. The first part deals with methodology, the second with religious violence in the Greco-Roman world, and the third with religious violence in late antiquity.

The two methodological essays by Hans Kippenberg and Jan Bremmer were lectures that both opened and closed the workshop program. Kippenburg discusses violence in both ancient and modern contexts, noting how the 9/11 attacks brought a new public concern to the topic of religious violence. He argues that religion is not the cause of violence but violence is spawned by religious communities whose traditions prefigure violent actions and then provide justification for violence. Bremmer investigates Christian cultural violence. Focusing on the direct violence of Roman persecutions against Christians and Christian violence against pagan temples such as those in Gaza, he argues that some instances of what appears to be religious violence are, in antiquity and late antiquity, not purely religious, and that cultural violence and direct violence must be distinguished. These two essays open up and lay out issues to which authors in the subsequent essays will return frequently.

In the seven essays that examine religious violence in the Greco-Roman world, the second part of the book, authors take on a variety of topics. Included are discussions of political violence in connection with “binding spells” (Esther Eidinow), the expulsion of Isis worshipers and astrologers from Rome (Christian Raschle), the complex historical reports of massacres in Jerusalem and Caesarea in 66 CE (Steve Mason), and the role of structural violence in the Roman emphasis on animal sacrifice (James Rives). Other essays examine violence in the Jewish diaspora under the Flavians (Andreas Bendlin), revelations of ideology in the coinage under the Tetrarchs (Erika Manders), and the impact of Lactantius’ apocalyptic writing pre-

senting Constantine as a Christian commander who avenges religious injustice with violence (Elizabeth DePalma Digeser).

The third section of the book focuses in on the relationship of religion to violence in Late Antiquity. Wendy Mayer discusses religious intolerance and violence. Of concern to her are the assumptions that drive investigations into religious violence, her advice being to explore violence in its local context while also interrogating definitions and theoretical constructs. Augustine is examined in an essay by Peter Van Nuffelen, especially with reference to the Donatist controversy and Augustine's defense of coercion as a corrective, with virtue rather than freedom being held as the highest human aspiration. The role of mob violence as it pertains to the destruction of the Serapeum in Alexandria in the late 4th cent. is discussed in light of social psychology insights into crowd behavior (Jitse Dijkstra). Among other issues discussed in this section of the book are these: the roles monks played in perpetuating violence based on a reading of Matthew 11.12 (Fabrizio Vecoli); the complex relation between violence and asceticism as a domination discipline in Theodore's *Historia Religiosa* (Chris De Wet); the post-Constantinian challenge that presented anti-Chalcedon Christian groups as martyrs and suffering saints (Christine Shephardson); the religiously motivated revolt of Vitalian against Emperor Anastasius in the 6th cent. (Hugh Elton); and a discussion of urban violence and how the rise in church power accompanied by fading Empire power created the conditions for popular outbreaks of violence (Geoffrey Greatrex).

The essays in the volume are uniformly of the highest scholarly caliber. Well-researched, well-written and the volume as a whole well-edited with essays offering occasional cross-references internal to the volume, the book makes a valuable contribution to understanding such matters as Christian cultural violence, the role of Religious Studies approaches to historical analysis, and a concern for clarity when using such terms as "religion" in a period when the concept, even the word, did not exist as understood in our contemporary situation. That aspiration for clarity extends to "violence" as well – cultural, actual-direct-physical, structural, and psychological. Concerns like those of William Cavanaugh (the "myth" of religious violence) are rarely discussed explicitly but many of the issues attending current discussions of religious violence, like Cavanaugh's, are actually quite present as a background framing for many of the essays.

The range of expertise and depth of understanding among the authors as they address their particular issues is impressive and imposing. The volume attends to a variety of scholarly matters such as the reliability of the Greco-Roman and Late Antiquity literary sources that present the incidents of violence, which are then subject to interpretation and analysis. Beyond that, however, this collection contributes

to discussions so important today in a post 9/11 world, especially the relation of religion to violence and the many variables that affect violence. Religion is beyond any doubt one of those variables. In the end, this collection reminds readers that the call for serious and sustained investigation of violence involving religion must continue apace even if the term “religious violence” is in many instances an inadequate and misleading moniker that inadvertently simplifies the very topic under scrutiny, for religion and violence is a topic that resists simplification.