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Religious Conflict: Definitions, Problems and Theoretical Approaches

The almost constant awareness today in the western media of conflict associated with religion is reflected in a rapidly growing scholarly literature on the topic. At the forefront of such studies is a natural preoccupation with its most visual, newsworthy, and disruptive aspect – its expression in physical violence.¹ Religious conflict is a much larger phenomenon, however, than religiously-motivated violence, while even religious violence itself is not simple. The latter encompasses not just the physical domain (violent acts), but also the discursive (violent, i.e., hostile/hate-filled speech),² raising questions about the precise relationship between these two forms, how each should be addressed, and the degree to which each is harmful to society. The motivation for such violence, moreover, is often complex, leading to the conclusion, on the one hand, that violent “religious” conflicts in late antiquity, for instance, were rarely purely religiously motivated. On careful examination they can be shown to owe as much, if not


² This is the focus of Michael Gaddis’ analysis of religious violence in late antiquity, in Id., There Is No Crime, where he labels it “extremist discourse.” It is also a focus of the Spanish projects discussed in section 2.2 below.
more, to political considerations, local conditions, and the personal motives of the chief protagonists. Conversely, it has been argued that in contemporary conflicts more generally – for example, in the case of those viewed as politically or ethnically motivated – the definition of religion brought to bear is idealised and impoverished, and that the religious element has, in consequence, often been underestimated. To complicate matters, religious violence can, particularly in the case of New Religious Movements (NRMs), be self-directed and free from any association with conflict. Conversely and manifestly, not all religious conflicts are violent.

As we can see simply from looking at this single most obvious aspect (violence) and as will become clearer in sections 2 and 3 below, on the one hand study of religious conflict is both topical and a rich field that offers a wide range of avenues for investigation. On the other, it is clear that what we mean by religious conflict requires careful definition, if we are to tease out the assumptions that underlie our approaches to it in our effort to seek solutions. Consequently, in section 1 we first provide a working definition of the topic. In section 2 we outline in brief the theoretical approaches that have been brought to bear in recent decades, including discussion of a number of significant research projects with specific relevance to the time period that is the focus of this volume (the first to ninth centuries CE). Paying particular attention to that time period, in section 3 we then discuss how this research has brought about a paradigm shift and is in the process of raising a variety of new questions.

1 Defining religious conflict

Conflict occurs when something is contested. When we couple religion with conflict, we might expect that what is contested is ideology or morality (i.e., belief).

3 See the conclusions of Johannes Hahn, Gewalt und religiöser Konflikt. Studien zu den Aus einandersetzungen zwischen Christen, Heiden und Juden im Osten des Römischen Reiches (von Konstantin bis Theodosius II), Klio Beihefte NF 8 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2004). The approach taken by the social scientists engaged in the DRC project referred to in n. 1 posits the influence on religious conflict of cultural, psychological, social, political and economic conditions.

4 See the introduction to Ronald L. Grimes, Ute Husken, Udo Simon, and Eric Venbrux, eds., Ritual, Media, and Conflict (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 4–5. I am indebted to Bronwen Nell for alerting me to the contribution of Ritual Studies to this discussion.

5 See the discussion in James R. Lewis, ed., Violence and New Religious Movements (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). Violence in these cases does not always manifest as mass suicide, but the example of NRMs cautions against drawing a direct line between religious violence and religious conflict.
But this is not necessarily the case, and religious conflict is best described as a more complex phenomenon that engages a combination of contested domains, including power, personality, space or place, and group identity. These contested domains should not be confused with enabling factors or conditions, which, as mentioned above, can be political, social, economic, cultural and psychological. When both of these aspects are taken into consideration, we should be open to the possibility that, as a religion develops over time and/or as different enabling conditions come into play, different contested domains are accorded priority. A distinction should also be drawn between the root cause/s of the religious conflict (what is contested) and the way in which the conflict is discursively or narratively framed. That is, what a conflict is said to be about may differ significantly from what is actually being contested. We should be similarly open to the possibility that what is contested may be reframed retrospectively, just as it is also possible that what is not a conflict becomes viewed or framed as a conflict in hindsight and vice versa.

Our primary definition – that religious conflict is a complex phenomenon that engages a combination of contested domains (ideology/morality, power, personality, space/place, and group identity), in turn enabled by a range of other conditions (political, social, economic, cultural and psychological) – gains further clarity when we turn to consider what religious conflict is not. The model developed by the Religious Rivalries Seminar conducted by the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies is helpful in this regard with its categorisation of four ways – coexistence, cooperation, competition and conflict – in which religions in the same environment (or marketplace) interrelate. While this model is limited in

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6 Neither is contested morality/ideology exclusive to religious conflict. See the ground-breaking work of the cognitive linguist George Lakoff, Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think (2nd edn; Chicago–London: University of Chicago Press, 2002), further developed in Id., The Political Mind. Why You Can't Understand 21st-Century Politics with an 18th-Century Brain (New York: Viking, 2008), in which contested morality is located in the domain of political conflict.

7 Understanding religious conflict in this way takes away the debate as to whether a conflict is or is not religiously motivated or “ausschließlich auf religiösen Gegensätzen beruhte” (the research question addressed by Hahn, Gewalt und religiöser Konflikt; see n. 3). For an example in which personality is a contested domain see the chapter by Pauline Allen; and for an example where conflict is itself contested see the chapter by David Sim in this volume.

that it refers only to conflict that occurs between or within religious groups, it does help us to distinguish, on one level, between the potentially blurred categories of conflict and competition. When we apply our primary definition, competition turns into conflict at the point when a particular domain/s become/s contested. Where this becomes complicated is that the two categories are not necessarily exclusive. If we consider the case of two religions competing for converts in the religious marketplace, the two groups can be focused towards each other in conflict, while simultaneously maintaining an outward focus towards potential converts as competitive rivals. Similarly, we should be open to the possibility that two distinct religions or two groups within the same religion could cooperate in some areas (e.g., charity), while being in conflict in others (e.g., ideology and/or ritual). In this model only coexistence and conflict are mutually exclusive, in that coexistence implies that the religious groups involved engage in no direct interaction.

These considerations require us to clarify two aspects of our definition: the agents involved; and what precisely identifies a conflict as religious. While individuals may be the chief protagonists, the coupling of religion with conflict implies that the agents involved are not individuals, but collective individuals, i.e., groups or communities. Martyrs or religious leaders, for instance, self-identify and operate as part of a larger system. If we accept this premise, then we can posit on the basis of the studies already mentioned that the agents in religious conflict are two or more groups that derive from identifiably separate religions, separate factions within the same religion (that result from splintering, i.e., sectarianism), the same faction within a religion (where splintering has not yet occurred – and may or may not, in fact, eventuate), and secular authority, the latter of which may also wield religious authority. Our definition of the second aspect (what identifies a conflict as religious) is related to how one defines religion and determines how broadly or narrowly we focus our investigation. At the beginning of this section we talked about the coupling of religion and conflict and it is this view, we suggest, that offers a useful definition that is not restrictive. Conflict is

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9 One of the parties drawn into religious conflict, particularly as a target when violence or the threat of violence is involved, can be secular authority (the government/state). See, e.g., the case of the Justus Freemen described by Jean Rosenfeld, “The Justus Freemen Standoff: The Importance of the Analysis of Religion in Avoiding Violent Outcomes,” in: *Millennialism, Persecution, and Violence: Historical Cases*, ed. Catherine Wessinger (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 323–46.

10 Blurring between competition and conflict is prevalent, e.g., in the Christian cult of the saints as demonstrated by a variety of case studies in *An Age of Saints? Power, Conflict and Dissent in Early Medieval Christianity*, eds. Peter Sarris, Matthew Dal Santo, and Phil Booth, Brill’s Series on the Early Middle Ages (Leiden: Brill, 2011).
religious when a conflict occurs in which religion is also involved. This avoids questions of the nature: when is a conflict religious and when is it political/ethnic, since it allows that a conflict can be both. It also avoids questions about degree, that is, whether a conflict is primarily religious or primarily political/ethnic, since under this definition all conflicts are religious in which, whether in large degree or small, religion is involved.

To sum up, then, for the purposes of studying this phenomenon in as open a way as possible religious conflict can be said to occur when the following conditions are satisfied:

(1) two or more collective agents are involved and the agents derive, for example, from separate religions, separate factions within the same religion, from within the same faction in the same religion, and/or secular authority;
(2) a domain – e.g., ideology/morality, power, personality, space/place, group identity – is contested, singly or in combination;
(3) there are enabling conditions – e.g., political, social, economic, cultural and psychological; and
(4) religion is involved (the degree to which it is involved is deemed irrelevant).

2 Recent theoretical approaches

2.1 Contemporary theories and approaches

The approaches to religious conflict are diverse and determined to some degree by the chronological focus. Studies of contemporary religious conflict emerge for the most part from the disciplines of religious studies and the social sciences and focus on a variety of aspects: root causes (thoughtworld/ideology); enabling conditions; and the important corollary of conflict, resolution/reconciliation. Sara Savage and her team at Cambridge University, for instance, apply cognitive psychology to understanding neurological causes of fundamentalisms and to developing educational programs that encourage the use of different brain pathways that lead to greater religious tolerance. Similarly, Catherine Wessinger, Jean Rosenfeld, and other experts in New Religious Movements (NRMs), partic-

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ularly within the United States, have successfully employed their understanding of the elements common in the internal thoughtworld of millenialist religious movements to avert violence in a recent NRM-state conflict.¹² As this particular field has continued to develop, new and broader questions are being asked about the relationship between New Religious Movements and violence, focusing not just on groups that inflict, but also on groups that are the targets of violence.¹³ An approach that derives from sociology and the Frankfurt school of Critical Theory, epitomised by Rudolf Siebert,¹⁴ addresses the question of resolution from a different perspective. In this view religion is intimately linked with economic and social struggle,¹⁵ of which religious conflict, resulting in pain and suffering, is an inevitable product. Conflict Theory, applied by Geoffrey Dunn in this volume, is an older sociological theory aligned with this approach. One outcome of recent developments in Critical Theory of relevance to our focus in this volume is a negative critique of Rational-Choice Theory, a theory based in economics and mathematics, which underpins Rodney Stark’s controversial analysis of the rise and success of Christianity.¹⁶

An interest in the origins of religious conflict, coupled with its resolution, is the focus of a different group of scholars, who approach these aspects from the combined perspectives of historical and gender studies and the political and social sciences.¹⁷ This work is of particular interest in that, like the research of Sara Savage and contemporary psychologists, it is aimed at providing a theoretical and practical framework from empirical studies.¹⁸ One aspect that the contribu-

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¹³ See the articles in Lewis, *Violence and New Religious Movements* (n. 5).


¹⁵ See Siebert, *Manifesto*, vol. 1, 11: “...the critical theory is a social theory, which understands modern civil society as an antagonistic totality of non-equivalent exchange processes.” Siebert’s central concern in these three volumes is to address the consequences of these processes, pain and suffering.


¹⁷ See Eynikel and Ziaka, *Religion and Conflict* (n. 1).

¹⁸ Erik Eynikel, “Introduction,” in: ibid., xv. Eynikel points out here the tendency in general debate concerning religious conflict to either neglect or overemphasise beliefs and discourses, in
tors to this manual emphasise is the importance to the three monotheistic reli-
gions of canonical texts, an element in religious conflict that is theorised within social psychology via social dominance theory and intratextuality. The discipline of ritual studies offers an entirely different way of approaching the phenomenon of religious conflict. The interdisciplinary project that gave rise to the volume *Ritual, Media, and Conflict* set out to address a gap in existing research, “ritual’s capacity for mediating or provoking conflict,” with specific reference to the way in which “media technologies are changing the dynamics of conflict and shaping strategies for deploying rituals and ritualized processes in situations of conflict.” Not all ritual is religious – ritualisation also marks the human life cycle – and not all of the chapters in their collaborative volume might seem at first glance to couple conflict with religion. Religion constantly lurks, however, in the background. Importantly, this study points out the utility of maintaining a broad definition of religion, which allows the drawing into consideration of aspects of conflict that might not otherwise be acknowledged to have religious relevance. A separate conference organised by Robert Langer, one of the participants in the Ritual, Media, and Conflict project, the results of which were published in a special issue of the journal *Die Welt des Islams*, demonstrates the interrelatedness of some of these theoretical approaches to the study of one aspect of religious conflict, authoritative discourse. Of special interest here is the application to Islam of the categories “orthodoxy” and “heterodoxy” (heresy), categories addition to emphasising only the destructive force of religion (e.g., violence, and religion as the cause of conflict).

19 Eynikel and Ziaka, *Religion and Conflict*, 17–48. For further discussion of the role of canonicity in relation to heterodoxy/orthodoxy and social conflict see the chapter by Pierluigi Piovanelli in this volume.


21 For the different disciplines from which the participants draw, which include cultural and social anthropology, communications, theatre, performance studies, sociology, art history, and archaeology, as well as religious studies, see Grimes et al., *Ritual*, ix–xvi. The research, jointly funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research and the German Research Foundation, is the result of collaboration between the Faculty of Religious Studies at Radboud University Nijmegen and the Ritual Dynamics Collaborative Research Center at the University of Heidelberg.


previously thought to be Eurocentric and invalid outside of a Christian context.\textsuperscript{24} In their contribution Langer and his co-author, Udo Simon, review previous criticisms and theorise about the applicability of categories of right and wrong belief as analytical tools, producing an important position piece for not just Islamic studies but assessment of this phenomenon in other religions.\textsuperscript{25} Although they draw no explicit connection, their approach aligns with the theories of psychologists concerning a constituent element in conflict, in-group and out-group dynamics.\textsuperscript{26}

### 2.2 Approaches to religious conflict in the period 50–850 CE

Some of these same theoretical approaches appear in recent studies of religious conflict in the period that stretches from the beginnings of Christianity to the beginnings of Islam. Rightly or wrongly – we will discuss this in section 3 – until recently a distinction has for the most part been drawn between the phenomenon in the period before the emperor Constantine the Great (that is, before Christianity was recognised by the state as a religion) and the period after Constantine (c. 313 CE onwards). This division goes hand in hand with the view that Christianity related to other religions differently before and after this defining event, the earlier period being characterised by rivalry and struggle for success, the later period by a position of dominance in regard to other religions. For approaches specific to this first period we turn again to the work of the Religious Rivalries Seminar of the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies,\textsuperscript{27} in addition to the

\textsuperscript{24} This is the view from the perspective of contemporary Islamic Studies. See Robert Langer and Udo Simon, “The Dynamics of Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy. Dealing with Divergence in Muslim Discourses and Islamic Studies,” Die Welt des Islams 48 (2008): 273 – 88 at 273. That the categories are not unique to Christianity or Eurocentric is demonstrated by John B. Henderson, The Construction of Orthodoxy and Heresy: Neo-Confucian, Islamic, Jewish and Early Christian Patterns (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1998), who documents the commonalities between the heresiological and heresiographical trends in these four religions, with which discourses in Hinduism and Buddhism also coincide. The discourses he analyses emerge from the Rabbinic Jewish tradition (1st century CE onwards), early Christianity (4th century CE onwards), eleventh-century Sunni Islam, and the Ch’eng Chu school of Neo-Confucianism in early imperial China.

\textsuperscript{25} Langer and Simon, “The Dynamics of Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy.”


\textsuperscript{27} Published in three collective volumes: Terence L. Donaldson, ed., Religious Rivalries and the Struggle for Success in Caesarea Maritima, SCJ 8 (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press,
research of Peter Lampe,²⁸ and the recent critique of Rodney Stark’s thesis by George Lundskow among others.²⁹ It is important to note that until very recently religious conflict per se has rarely been a topic of investigation with regard to this earlier time period and thus has received little in the way of focused theoretical reflection.³⁰ More commonly individual or tangential aspects of this phenomenon have been the topic of investigation, such as religious polemic (particularly apologetics and adversus-literature), the parting of the ways between Christianity and Judaism, martyrdom, tolerance, legislation about religion, the relationship between religion and politics, and persecution.

What is significant about the Religious Rivalries Seminar is that it approached – primarily from the disciplines of social history, New Testament studies and archaeology – the topic of religious rivalry in the first two centuries of the Common Era from the perspectives of Christianity and the urban social setting, utilising specific urban case studies – Caesarea Maritima in Palestine, Smyrna and Sardis, and North Africa – to explore this phenomenon.³¹ Within their model of the religious marketplace, derived from Critical Theory and its antecedents,³² conflict is not their primary focus. Given their interest in Christianity and

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²⁹ Lundskow, “The Concept of Choice” (n. 15). Lundskow’s is not the only critical response to Stark’s thesis, which are numerous, but it serves as representative. Stark’s thesis is also consciously addressed by the four essays in Part 3 of Vaage, Religious Rivalries and the Rise of Christianity.
³⁰ More common is a preoccupation with religious pluralism, identity, and competition or cohabitation as seen in a number of projects in which Nicole Belayche has been a key participant: e.g., “Cohabitations et contacts religieux dans les mondes hellénistique et romain” (Centre Glotz, 2007–2010), and the resultant publication, L’oiseau et le poisson: cohabitations religieuses dans les mondes grec et romain, eds. Nicole Belayche and Jean-Daniel Dubois, Religions dans l’histoire 6 (Paris: Presses de l’Université Paris–Sorbonne, 2011). Cf. Nicole Belayche and Simon C. Mimouni, eds., Entre lignes de partage et territoires de passage. Les identités religieuses dans les mondes grec et romain: “Paganisms”, “judaïsmes,” “christianismes”, Collection de la Revue des Études Juives 47 (Peeters: Leuven, 2009).
³¹ See Ascough, “Retrospection,” 155–56. As Donaldson, Religious Rivalries in Caesarea Maritima, 3, points out, their interest was primarily in religions not as isolated entities, but as social and urban phenomena.
in the period in question, their primary focus is the struggle for success. In this context, urban societies are viewed as plurireligious and conflict is viewed as one of four possible modes of religious interaction. A significant finding to emerge from the detailed case studies was the predominance of evidence of coexistence and cooperation, and the slender evidence for competition and conflict. In Caesarea Maritima, for instance, there was no clear evidence of sustained conflict with “outsiders,” but clear evidence of Christians competing with one another. At Smyrna evidence for competition and conflict was greater, but again, in many cases was found to occur within a designated group. From the study of North Africa what again stood out was evidence of inner-group conflict within a wider context of religious coexistence.

These findings are matched in large part by those of Peter Lampe for the same time period (the first two centuries CE) based on another specific urban case study, Rome. There, through application of a social-historical analysis, the elicited conflict is identified as inner-group, in which the contested domain is charity and the enabling condition social stratification. Fractionation, a term which Lampe applies to this period with reference to the natural emergence and development in Rome of independently worshipping Christian groups based around house-churches (tituli) – that is, the religion is comprised of small


Note that the concept of cohabitation adopted by Nicole Belayche and her collaborators is not inconsistent with the four “modalities of interaction” proposed here, cohabitation implying simply that the religions inhabit the same social and geographic space. It is also important to note that underlying the marketplace model adopted by the Religious Rivalries Seminar is an anthropological paradigm that views religion in the Hellenistic and republican periods as embedded in the domains of politics and kinship, whereas the social shift that occurred with the rise of the Roman empire was accompanied by a shift to religious pluralism, which enabled choice. See Donaldson, Religious Rivalries in Caesarea Maritima, 5–6.


Ascough, “Retrospection,” 165.

Ascough, “Retrospection,” 167. For a similar location of conflict in this period within a single religious group (between two factions, within the same faction or between a group and its founder) see the chapters by Ian Elmer, Michael Theophilos and A.M. Smith, and David Sim in this volume.

Lampe, From Paul to Valentinus, 90–99.
units rather than unified, offers another approach of interest to the question of pre- and post-Constantinian conflict, since it implies an organic movement in the first centuries of Christianity from scattered, independently worshipping groups without any central control to the development of centralisation and unification. Of further interest is his thesis that fractionation is associated with social status – fractionation is greater when the social status of the individuals who adhere to a religion, in this instance Christianity, is lower; conversely, agglomeration and unification increase in relation to the increase in social status of its constituent members. Lampe further associates fractionation with tolerance of other theological opinions (ideologies), and views as an enabling condition in increasing unification the development of monarchical episcopacy and presbyterial governance.

Lundskow, like the scholars of the Religious Rivalries Seminar, returns to the question of success, but takes a longer-term view of the process. Appealing to class- and culture-based theory – an approach from within sociology – Lundskow argues that the success of (orthodox) Christianity was due to external politics, not to the intrinsic quality of its beliefs or membership criteria (the marketplace analogy). As Christianity rose gradually, paganism died gradually, and Christianity succeeded because it “became a direct expression of the power interests of the ruling class,” eventually becoming a religious monopoly. A contributing factor to its success was its assimilation, rather than replacement or destruction of traditional pagan cultural traditions. There was nothing distinct about Christianity till much later; instead there was a great deal of religious blending. This theory has indirect implications of interest to the question of religious conflict, particularly in light of the recent paradigm shift in archaeological and historical scholarship concerning early post-Constantinian developments in inter-religious relations, namely that the Christian discourse of temple (and synagogue) destruction obscures a more eirenic reality. It also aligns with

39 The phenomenon is discussed in detail in Lampe, From Paul to Valentinus, 357–408 (Part 5).
40 See Lampe, From Paul to Valentinus, 372.
41 Lampe, From Paul to Valentinus, 385–96.
42 Lampe, From Paul to Valentinus, 397–408.
44 Ibid.
recent scholarship on identity differentiation and boundary-setting between Christianity and its parent religion, Judaism.⁴⁷ Of more direct relevance is Lundskow’s theorising of the role in Christianity’s success of spirituality – a unifying nomos (accepted set of ideals and morals) – and social conflict. Nomos is viewed as holding a social group together during intolerance and persecution, but is inseparable from class and struggle.⁴⁸ Lundskow’s approach is in the end a Critical Theory approach, similar to that of Siebert’s analysis of contemporary religion.

Among a cluster of recent research projects on the topic that originate in Spain, the previously defining watershed of 313 CE runs strong even when the phenomenon (and its absence) is reframed using the categories religious “tolerance” and “intolerance.” The project Conflicto y convivencia en el cristianismo primitivo: retórica religiosa y debates escatológicos (2009),⁴⁹ for instance, adopts a paradigm of religious plurality and tolerance for the first three centuries CE and of religious coercion associated with intolerance from the fourth to seventh centuries. The same paradigm, which views Christianity’s exclusivist character coupled with its empowerment in the fourth century as a driving force behind Christianity’s interaction with other religions in the period after 313 CE, informs the joint project of Mar Marcos and José Fernandez Ubiña: Multiculturalismo, convivencia religiosa y conflicto en la Antigüedad tardía (ss. III–VII) (2007–2009),⁵⁰ funded in a second phase: Estrategias clásicas y cristianas para la resolución de conflictos en la Antigüedad Tardía (2010–2012).⁵¹ In all of these proj-


⁴⁹ Led by Mercedes López Salvá, it involved eleven researchers from Universidad Complutense Madrid, Universidad de Cantabria, Universidad de Granada, Universidad de León, Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas (Spain), and Harvard University (Department of Classics, and the Divinity School). See Mercedes López Salvá, ed., De cara al Más Allá. Conflicto, convivencia y asimilación de modelos paganos en el cristianismo antiguo (Zarazoga: Libros Pórtico, 2010).

⁵⁰ See their outline of the project in Mar Marcos and José Fernández Ubiña, “Multiculturalismo, convivencia religiosa y conflicto en la Antigüedad Tardía,” in: La investigación sobre la Antigüedad Tardía en España: estado de los estudios y nuevas perspectivas, ed. M.V. Escrivanño Paño, Mainake 31 (Univ. Málaga, 2009), 187–96. It generated two sub-projects, each led by one of the investigators: Pluridad religiosa y conflicto en el Imperio romano (s. III–IV): convivencia y exclusión (Marcos); and Diversidad cultural y uniformidad religiosa en el Antigüedad Tardía. La genealogía de la intolerancia cristiana (Ubiña).

⁵¹ Anticipated in Marcos and Ubiña, “Multiculturalismo,” 189.
ects the topic is pursued through the disciplines of philology, history and literary studies. While there is some theorising in the publications that have thus far resulted from the project, conscious reflection is focused for the most part on the validity and definition of the categories tolerance and intolerance.\textsuperscript{52}

This same paradigm – that the period after 313 CE took a coercive turn in state-religion and inter-religious relations characterised by violence – is operative in two ground-breaking monographs by Michael Gaddis and Tom Sizgorich, respectively.\textsuperscript{53} The approach in both studies is primarily historical and concerned with discourse. Gaddis appeals to a shift in the ideologies of martyrdom and resistance to explain the violence that occurred at a variety of levels when Christianity became a universalising power.\textsuperscript{54} Sizgorich applies social scientific theories of inter-communal boundary construction and policing to the late Roman and early Islamic worlds as a means of understanding “why militant forms of piety...became such crucial resources for communal self-fashioning among early Christian and early Muslim communities.”\textsuperscript{55} In dividing his study into two parts – post-Constantinian Christianity and early Islam – he in effect expands the paradigm to include a new defining shift in inter-/intra-religious relations of particular relevance (the middle decades of the seventh century and the


\textsuperscript{53} Gaddis, There is No Crime; Sizgorich, Violence and Belief (n. 1). Shaw, Sacred Violence (n. 1), follows in their footsteps. Prior to the emergence of an interest in religious violence in the mid 2000s, the only previous analysis relating to this period was an isolated study from the 1970s: Timothy E. Gregory, Vox Populi: Popular Opinion and Violence in the Religious Controversies in the Fifth Century A.D. (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 1979).

\textsuperscript{54} See Gaddis, There is No Crime, xi: “...this study is not about institutions. It is, rather, about mentalities, the ideologies, moral postures, and emotional dispositions of violent actors, victims, critics, and observers. In these areas too the Christian Roman Empire laid down patterns and precedents. It saw the fruition of an ideology of martyrly resistance, and the transformation of martyrdom from commemoration of violence suffered to justification for violence inflicted – from dying for God to killing for God. Its emperors and bishops responded in turn by laying out a centrist ideology of coercive consensus that would be invoked time and again over the centuries by those in power...”

\textsuperscript{55} Sizgorich, Violence and Belief, 4. The theories, introduced in Chapter 2 (esp. 48–51), are drawn from anthropology, sociology, and identity studies and centre on the role of narrative.
rise of Islam). To these studies can be added three different, very recent approaches to the phenomenon: Adam Schor’s appeal to Social Network Theory to explain an enabling condition in religious conflict,\(^6\) Tina Shepardson’s application of theories from social geography to explore the contested domains of space and place,\(^5\) and Beth Digeser’s study that explores the less obvious role of non-polemical language and ideology as triggers for religious persecution.\(^8\) The agency of seemingly ordinary language in violent conflict, in contrast to the more obviously inflammatory use of publicly-chanted slogans, is a topic raised by Brent Shaw in his recent monolithic historical and archaeological study of the “Donatist” controversy in North Africa.\(^9\) An additional feature of this work is employment of the language of dissent, a development recently introduced by scholars of late antiquity in an attempt to avoid perpetuating the “orthodox/heterodox” discourse of the dominant literary sources.\(^60\)


\(^8\) Elizabeth DePalma Digeser, *A Threat to Public Piety: Christians, Platonists, and the Great Persecution* (Ithaca–London: Cornell University Press, 2012). Digeser sets out her approach in the Preface (ix) as follows: “What is the relationship between philosophical religious thought and violence? In attempting to understand religious violence, sociologists, and other social scientists often assume that material conditions and economic interests are the real motivations for violence directed against particular religious groups. If ideas make a difference at all we see them as rationalizations, justifications, or explanations for violence, not as motive forces in themselves. This book turns the conventional wisdom on its head, for it argues that ideas about correct ritual and metaphysical doctrine inspired people to bring about Rome’s last and longest effort forcibly to repress Christianity. And it involves philosophers and theologians as the primary sources of these ideas even though they themselves never called for forcible repression of their doctrinal opponents…”


3 Shifting paradigms, old problems, and new questions

Studies of religious conflict in the period between the emergence of Christianity and of Islam as religions have been conducted predominantly from the perspective of Christianity, and the studies offered in the present volume are no exception. It is this perspective that is largely responsible for the interpretive categories heterodoxy/orthodoxy and for the differentiated view of inter-religious relations in the periods pre- and post-Constantine and post-rise-of-Islam. Lurking behind the first is the perennial issue of the bias of the surviving sources, and the historical forces that led to the transmission of some and the suppression or dwindling into obscurity of others. Lurking behind the second is the persistence of a mode of interpretation that views certain moments in history (in this case, the birth and death of Christ, Constantine’s adoption of Christianity, the fall of Rome, and the Arab conquest) as defining and disruptive.

If the bias brought to the study of religious conflict in this period by the often unconscious wearing of “Christianity-coloured glasses” is proving more resistant to change, in other areas the paradigms that lie behind how this subject is approached are – in some cases, rapidly – undergoing alteration. As Richard Ascough notes, when the Religious Rivalries Seminar initially formulated their approach, in their adduction of “Christianity v. Judaism” as a model for rivalry they

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61 This is even the case with Daniel Boyarin and a number of other Jewish scholars who analyse this period (e.g., Hagith Sivan), described by Steven Fine in his review of Hagith Sivan, Palestine in Late Antiquity (2008), Review of Biblical Literature, published online 10/17/2009, www.bookreviews.org, as viewing rabbinic sources through “Christianity-colored glasses.” For a discussion of this problem see the lengthy review article by Jörg Rüpke, “Early Christianity out of, and in, Context,” Journal of Roman Studies 99 (2009): 182–93.

were, as they subsequently realised, unduly influenced by the adversus Judaeos literary tradition.⁶¹ Their recognition that this strand of Christian discourse was “as concerned with inner-Christian conflict and self-definition as with engaging with the ‘other’ in debate”⁶⁴ has in recent, as yet unpublished papers, been further refined into a thesis that removes the “other” from Christian discourse of this kind entirely.⁶⁵ What these scholars confirm is an increasing recognition that religious conflict that self-identifies – and was thus previously viewed – as inter-religious is now proving on careful analysis to be primarily intra-religious, dissolving the formerly pervasive oppositional dichotomies Christians and Jews, and Christians and pagans.⁶⁶ The note of caution the Religious Rivalries Seminar raised against reading such “rivalry” discourse as primarily concerned with self-definition,⁶⁷ on the other hand, reminds us of the importance of locating such discourse carefully within its cultural and social setting.

Another paradigm that is in the process of changing is the approach to the history of this period. The scholarship of late antiquity has done much to drive the shift from a predominantly economic and political view of history to a cultural, social one in which nations, societies, and communities do not rise and fall, but undergo transformation.⁶⁸ The impact of this change for how we now view the seventh century and the rise of Islam is profound. Driven by recent archaeological research, scholars now see events that were previously viewed as catastrophic (on the basis of literary sources) as effecting an administrative change in the eastern half of the Mediterranean world that had a relatively

⁶³ Ascough, “Retrospection,” 167–68. Although, see the chapter by James McLaren in this volume on the origins of this discourse.
⁶⁴ Ibid., 168. See the chapter by Sarah Gador-Whyte in this volume, which arrives at a similar conclusion.
⁶⁶ To which, for the early Islamic period, we should now add as dichotomies to be treated with suspicion Muslims and Jews and Muslims and Christians.
⁶⁷ Ascough, “Retrospection,” 168.
soft impact. Economies and trade, for the most part, continued to prosper.\textsuperscript{69} This change in the historical view undermines the impression of conflict and apocalypse promoted by the dominant discourse\textsuperscript{70} and aligns more closely with the findings of the Religious Rivalries Seminar regarding the prevalence of evidence for actual religious coexistence and cooperation, as well as Lundskow’s thesis of transition and assimilation.\textsuperscript{71} Collectively, these shifts in the way we view the phenomenon of religious conflict, the historical period, and the discourse undermine the paradigm of periodisation (that there are distinct differences in religious interaction before Constantine, after Constantine and following the advent of Islam). Behind this lurks other assumptions that also require reconsideration – namely, that polytheism (“paganism”) is generally tolerant, while Christianity is exclusionist and intolerant, the latter linked to its requirement that adherents hold to a defined set of sacred truths (Christianity as a “religion of the book”). Similarly, Lampe’s fractionation thesis implies a period of agglomeration and unification in the centuries before Constantine, while unification, centralisation, and religious dominance in the period after Constantine imply increasing intra-group conflict and sectarianism. The thesis of tolerance, of importance for how one views the first to third centuries CE, has with varied success for several decades been undergoing challenge.\textsuperscript{72}


\textsuperscript{70} For the influence and role of apocalyptic discourse see the chapters by Sarah Gador-Whyte and Damien Casey in this volume.

\textsuperscript{71} This holds true for the period from the fourth to eighth centuries. As Daniel King notes in his review of Sizgorich, Violence and Belief (Bryn Mawr Classical Review 2010.08.36), despite the author’s paradigm of the period after Constantine as being characterised by violence, “it is... clear that inter-communal religious violence was not a particularly common or easily conjured phenomenon...’peaceful coexistence and intercommunal exchange was the norm rather than the exception’ (201).” See also the chapter by Bronwen Neil in this volume regarding the early response by Christians to Islam.

To sum up, the very language that scholars of this period use to discuss religious conflict – for example, dissent, struggle, rivalry, success, triumph, resistance, suppression, coercion – reflects a variety of underlying assumptions about the character of different religions and how they (including secular authority) interacted. As we seek a deeper understanding of this topic, awareness of those assumptions and the larger paradigms with which they are associated is clearly critical. Locating the gap between the discourse promoted by our sources and what we can retrieve concerning what actually occurred – no easy feat in itself – emerges as another important consideration, while approaches to the issue from the point of view of boundary setting and identity formation raise the question – “What conflict?” – from the perspective of the individual, not the community. The warnings of the Religious Rivalries Seminar, and now also Jörg Rüpke,⁷ about neglect of the social and cultural context of conflict are in respect to all of these issues particularly apposite. One wonders whether taking the definition that we propose and viewing religious conflict in this period from the perspective of contested domains, tracing the priority accorded to different domains in different locations over the progression of time,⁷⁴ might not offer a way forward that avoids the problems of periodisation and takes many, if not all, of these issues into consideration. This would help us to answer one question that previous approaches raise: where conflict sits within the evolution of a religion – if in the context of conflict evolution is, in the first instance, a valid model.

Comparison of approaches to contemporary religious conflict and to the same phenomenon in the period from 50 to 850 CE helps also to highlight in the case of the latter both the narrowness of focus to date and the lack of adequate theorisation. The mechanisms involved in the resolution of religious conflict and the role of religion in reconciliation, for instance, prevalent in studies of contemporary religious conflict, are aspects scarcely addressed in analysis of this earlier period.⁷⁵ Similarly, the role of both media and ritual, the latter of which has broad potential, has received scant attention.⁷⁶ In relation to both

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⁷³ Rüpke, “Early Christianity out of, and in, Context” (n. 61).
⁷⁴ An approach taken in the chapter by Pauline Allen in this volume, who applies it to a single geographic focus.
⁷⁵ A rare exception is phase two of the project led by Mar Marcos and José Fernández Ubiña, referenced in section 2.2 above (nn. 49–50), of which the results have yet to be published. See also the chapter by Ray Laird in this volume.
⁷⁶ An exception in the area of media is the chapter by Wendy Mayer in this volume.
the contemporary world and the early Christian/late antique/early Islamic past, on the other hand, studies of religious conflict have largely ignored its expression as a rural phenomenon. How does religious conflict – and, indeed, does it – impact rural dwellers and rural communities? Does the phenomenon differ significantly in a rural environment?\footnote{77}{Here we except study of New Religious Movements that form their own isolated rural communities (e.g., the Justus Freemen, and Branch Davidians), referring rather to rural communities whose rationale is social, political and/or economic.} So far, to a large degree it has been explored as a phenomenon germane to the urban context.\footnote{78}{Donaldson, \textit{Religious Rivalries in Caesarea Maritima}, 3, in arguing the case for an urban focus acknowledges that religion was by no means restricted to the city, but continues: “the development, spread and interaction of religious movements took place primarily in urban settings in the Greco-Roman world...It was in the city that one found the necessary concentration of people and resources to support a religious infrastructure...”} In both fields, too, the focus on violence (one extreme of religious conflict) obscures broader questions about what occurs before or apart from violence: the mechanisms at play in how conflict originates in the first instance, how it manifests in its early stages, the phenomenon of splintering into sub-groups (sectarianism) within a religion, and precisely what factors are operative in conflict escalation and de-escalation. Can – and should – religious conflict be viewed as something that occurs on a sliding scale? Or is this yet another model that is restrictive? These are only some of the many questions that arise. In regard to understanding the phenomenon as it manifested in the period between the origins of Christianity and the origins of Islam, we have in many respects progressed only a short distance beyond the beginning. In the range of approaches they pursue, the chapters in this volume both adopt some of the existing paradigms and attempt to push the boundaries a little further. In this respect they nudge us further towards opening up our understanding of the mechanisms at play when religion and conflict come together.