

## *The Challenge of Religious Violence*

### Imperial Ideology and Policy in the Fourth Century

JOHANNES HAHN

FOR CENTURIES, THE PHENOMENON OF RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE WAS VIRTUALLY unknown to the Roman empire: Roman officials understood the “persecution” and condemnation of Christians as necessary for maintaining law and order. They would have been at a loss if they had had to document cases of religious violence in their districts, just as members of the imperial *consilium* would also have been puzzled by such reports. Historians today—in contrast to early Christians<sup>1</sup>—find it equally difficult to detect religious violence under the Principate.<sup>2</sup> One might cite an incident in Lydian Kolyda, memorialized in an inscription in the second century. According to the brief report, a mob gathered during a festival in honor of Mes Motylleites, advanced with clubs and swords on a temple building identified as a *basilica*, attacked the temple slaves, and smashed the cult images.<sup>3</sup> A striking case of religious violence in Roman Asian Minor, it seems. But the background of this event, the goals, and even the identity of the assailants are completely unknown: the dedicator of the expiatory inscription saw no reason to record them.

Religious violence as a phenomenon of public life is indeed peculiar to Late Antiquity. Moreover, in the typology of public disturbances—food riots,

1 Christians themselves, from very early on (see the report on the stoning of the deacon Stephanus by members of the Sanhedrin in Acts 6–7, or the story of the riot of the silversmiths of Ephesus in Acts 19.23–39), fostered stories of how they suffered not only state-orchestrated persecution but also popular violence. In martyr acts (e.g., *Mart. Polyc.* 3.2; 12.2; 13.1), the (supposedly) popular demand for the death of Christian victims suggests religiously motivated violence—or perhaps rather illustrates a Christian perception that connected outbreaks of violence with religious beliefs.

2 I exclude the few cases of religious violence by Christians against pagan cult sites and images attested in the third century, the purpose of which was to obtain martyrdom—a practice also condemned by the early church. See, for example, *Canon. Elvir.* 60. Cf. Stewart 1999; Butterweck 1994; Bowersock 1995.

3 The report is an expiatory inscription published in Herrmann/Malay 2007. See Chaniotis 2009, 115–153.

theater and circus revolts, violent religious conflicts<sup>4</sup>—religious unrest and violence are of particular religious, social, political, and historical interest because of the striking frequency with which they occur in Late Antiquity, and even more so because the contemporary tradition records them in great detail.

Unlike circus revolts or food riots, which proved to be a specific problem of the urban culture of the Roman Empire, violent confrontations of a religious nature were not limited to the city. On the contrary, religious violence extended far beyond the city limits. Whole regions of the countryside, especially in Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and parts of North Africa, were affected by it. It will emerge below that religious violence in public life was not merely a challenge faced by the Roman state and in particular by the emperor. Rather, it is a historical phenomenon that is inconceivable without the involvement and even the initiative of the imperial court. The massive patronage of the Christian Church by the emperors since Constantine decisively fostered the rise of an aggressive religiosity and readiness to resort to public violence in the name of religion. Within a matter of decades, the prevalence of religious violence against the meeting places and holy sites of rival sects, as well as against persons of different religious belief or identity, became a serious threat to public order in numerous cities and communities of the Roman Empire, reaching a first climax in the reign of Theodosius I. Religious conflict, however, including isolated, local cases in which conflict escalated to the violent suppression of persons of different faith and even bloody public confrontations, remained characteristic of late-antique society into the age of Justinian.

Bitter debate about the veracity and accuracy of different concepts of God and of religious belief, about articles of faith, and about cult practices rapidly entered the public discourse, especially in Christian circles. Striking threats of violence were soon pervasive in religious rhetoric—and imperial proclamations will have had no small part in this.

Only a few years after the death of the first Christian emperor, around AD 345, the convert and Christian pamphleteer Firmicus Maternus appealed to the sons of Constantine to put a violent end to pagan cults and rituals. His demands breathe that aggressive Christian rhetoric that would directly change life in many communities under Constantius II, causing religious conflicts to break out and escalate to violent confrontations on the street:

These practices must be eradicated, Most Holy Emperors, utterly eradicated and abolished. All must be set aright by the severest laws of your

<sup>4</sup> So already the differentiation in the classic work by Jones 1964, vol. 2, 694, followed by Cameron 1976a, 271, with the reservations of Whitby 1999, 232.

edicts, so that the ruinous error of this delusion may no longer besmirch the Roman world. . . . Only a little is lacking that the devil should be utterly overthrown and laid low by your laws, and that the horrid contagion of idolatry should die out and become extinct. The venom of this poison has vanished, and every single day marks a weakening in the hard core of godless passion. Up with the banner of faith! For you the divine will has reserved this task. . . . Happy you whom God has made partners in executing His purpose and His will. For your hands the benevolent Godhead of Christ has reserved the extermination of idolatry and the overthrow of the pagan temples. . . . Take away, yes, calmly take away, Most Holy Emperors, the adornments of the temples. Let the fire of the mint or the blaze of the smelters melt them down, and confiscate all the votive offerings to your own use and ownership.<sup>5</sup>

The aggression and naked intolerance of Christian leaders and groups who unexpectedly exchanged outlawry and persecution for the emperor's favor were not the only factors that promoted a climate of religious tension, threats, and violence. The radicalization of the public discourse on divine truth and the controversy with dissenters of other faiths, the militancy of many converts, and the readiness of the Christian faithful, communities, or specific groups (often of ascetic background) to resort to violence undoubtedly indicate how religious dissent might escalate into the open use of violence and bloody confrontations between Christians or between Christians and pagans (or Jews). Yet this radicalization would have been inconceivable without the conversion of Constantine as a precondition. The decision of the emperor first to promote, then to impose *one* belief, one imperial religion, and one sacred organization, the imperial church, and the simultaneous withdrawal of the privileges and the ensuing suppression of traditional cults and other rival religious communities would mark the religious and political life of the Roman empire to an extent that was previously inconceivable: clearly abandoning Roman religious tradition, for the first time the late-antique emperors developed the goals and

<sup>5</sup> Firm. *Err. relig.* 16.3, 20.7, and 28.6 (trans. Forbes 1970): *Amputanda sunt haec, sacratissimi imperatores, penitus atque delenda, et severissimis edictorum vestrorum legibus corrigenda, ne diutius Romanum orbem praesumptionis istius error funestus immaculet. . . . Modicum tantum superest ut legibus vestris funditus prostratus diabolus iaceat, ut extinctae idololatriae pereat funesta contagio. Veneni huius virus evanuit et per dies singulos substantia profanae cupiditatis exspirat. Erigite vexillum fidei: vobis hoc divinitas reservavit. . . . Felices vos quoque: gloriae ac voluntatis suae deus fecit esse participes, idololatriae excidium et profanarum aedium ruinam propitius Christus populo vestris manibus reservavit. . . . Tollite, tollite securi, sacratissimi imperatores, ornamenta templorum. Deos istos aut monetae ignis aut metallorum coquat flamma, donaria universa ad utilitatem vestram dominiumque transferte.* On which, see Drake 1998; Caseau 2007; Kahlos 2009.



instruments of a far-reaching, innovative religious policy. They thereby defined and opened up a new area of political action, one that would exert its influence far beyond the limits of religious life in countless cities and communities: the state intervened directly and indirectly in centuries-old practices and norms of public life and promoted a profound transformation of religious life and, with it, of society and its elite. Thus, within a few generations, namely, in the Theodosian era, the religious unity of the empire under Christian emperors was imposed with increasing pressure.

Christian emperors since Constantine employed legislation above all to realize their self-imposed political goals: the spread of the Christian faith throughout the empire and the suppression of pagan cults and rival religious systems or sects.<sup>6</sup> This legislation restricted pagan cult practices ever more over the course of the fourth century and finally prohibited sacrifice under threat of punishment, but its *immediate* effect should not be overestimated. Even Constantine's measures, which included the demolition of specific temples, were far more limited and sporadic than his biographer and historian, Eusebius, would have us believe.<sup>7</sup> The resonance of such acts as public signals, however, was considerable. Laws and edicts, often provided with lengthy instructions, were read and posted in the public places of the cities of the empire; they proclaimed to the entire population of the empire the bonds between the emperor and the church (but not rival Christian sects, defamed as heretical) and propagated the marginalization of the old cults and other religions.<sup>8</sup> Above all, these proclamations breathe an imperial spirit as offensive as it is aggressive: *cesset superstitio, sacrificiorum aboleatur insania* decrees Constantius II only a few years after the death of Constantine, bluntly revealing his opinion of the cult practices of (still) the majority of the population of the empire.<sup>9</sup> He decrees the closing of pagan temples with the intention that *omnibus licentiam delinquendi perditis abnegari*; he threatens death by the sword for violating the prohibition of sacrifice.<sup>10</sup> The aggressive, swiftly Christianized rhetoric

6 This is true particularly of late-antique Judaism, which flourished remarkably in the east of the empire; see Wilken 1983; Stroumsa 2007.

7 See most recently Wallraff 2011a.

8 On the staging and effect of the proclamation of imperial laws in the cities of the empire, see Harries 1999, 70–76, and Matthews 2000, 187–195, with references.

9 *Cod. Theod.* 16.10.2: "Superstition shall cease; the madness of sacrifices shall be abolished" (AD 341). According to Euseb. *Vit. Const.* 2.45, already Constantine had proclaimed anti-pagan measures in derogatory terms: "one [of the rulings] was intended to restrain the idolatrous abominations which in time past had been practised in every city and country; and it provided that no one should erect images or practise divination and other false and foolish arts or offer sacrifice under any circumstances."

10 *Cod. Theod.* 16.10.4: *placuit omnibus locis adque urbibus universis claudi protinus templa et accessu vetito omnibus licentiam delinquendi perditis abnegari. volumus etiam cunctos sacrificiis abstinere. quod si quis aliquid forte huiusmodi perpetraverit, gladio ultore sternatur* (346 [354?] Dec. 1).

of imperial proclamations first adopts the pejorative term *pagani* in the year 370 as the official designation for practitioners of traditional religions or polytheists. The word had been coined in Christian circles as a demeaning general term for the uneducated rural population that adhered to traditional cults. It was, however, the increasingly juridical usage of *superstitio*—false belief, but also illegal religious practices—that advanced in word and deed the outlawing and suppression of all non-Christians and “heretics.”<sup>11</sup> Fully preserved anti-pagan and anti-heretic legal texts, that is, those still provided with their verbose *praefationes*, from the first decades of the fifth century bristle with often nakedly violent diction; their readers must have inferred corresponding treatment of persons of different faith by the state.<sup>12</sup>

Even if it is doubtful whether religious laws were consistently enforced at the local level, the religious zeitgeist is unmistakable. And all inhabitants of the empire must have known that those “thousand terrors of the laws” alluded to in a decree issued a century after Constantine<sup>13</sup> could suddenly materialize in their own community, far from the court in Constantinople, if only an efficient official or influential bishop with extensive connections knew how to wield them.<sup>14</sup> Such laws must indeed have spread terror, however inconsistently they were formulated, issued, and enforced; they certainly were enforced locally at the latest in the late fourth century, if not already under Constantius II (about

11 Salzman 1987. On the history and semantics of the concept, see now also Kahlos 2007.

12 The *praefationes* of the sixteen, resp. twenty-one imperial constitutions on matters of cult, the so-called *Constitutiones Sirmondianae*, as well as the texts of the later *Novellae* of Theodosius II and Valentinian III reflect this moralizing (and theologizing) dimension of late-antique imperial legislation with striking clarity. In contrast to the religious laws preserved in the *Codex Theodosianus*, the texts in these collections are transmitted intact and have not been stripped of their introductory explanations, which are normally cut from the texts in the *Codex*. On the *Constitutiones Sirmondianae*, see Vessey 1993; Matthews 2000, 121–167, esp. 160–164.

13 *Nov. Theod.* 2.3.10: *Quos non promulgatarum legum mille terrores, non denuntiandi exilii poena compescunt, ut, si emendari non possint, mole saltem criminum et illuvie victimarum discerent abstinere. Sed prorsus ea furoris peccatur audacia, iis improborum conatibus patientia nostra pulsatur, ut si oblivisci cupiat dissimulare non possit. Quamquam igitur amor religionis numquam possit esse securus, quamquam pagana dementia cunctorum suppliciorum acerbitates exposcat, lenitatis tamen memores nobis innatae trabali iussione decrevimus, ut, quicumque pollutis contaminatisque mentibus in sacrificio quolibet in loco fuerit comprehensus, in fortunas eius, in sanguinem ira nostra consurgat. Oportet enim dare nos hanc victimam meliorem ara Christianitatis intacta servata.* See also Brown 1998, 638. On this law from January 31, 438, and the imperial attitude apparently hostile to pagans, “heretics,” and others, see also the analysis of Millar 2006. An unusually evocative depiction of the exercise of imperial power by law, which paints the *legum mille terrores* in lurid colors, may be found in a sermon of Shenoute of Atripe: Amélineau 1914, pp. 523, 7–22, cited in Hahn 2011, 201.

14 Perhaps the most illuminating example of the great importance of such contexts and how specific individuals might change them by altering local religious conditions is Gaza in the fourth and early fifth century. See Van Dam 1985; Hahn 2004 (with further literature).

the implementation of his religious policy we know far too little):<sup>15</sup> anyone who sacrificed an animal or read the entrails faced the death penalty; heretics faced near-lethal flogging with lead-studded scourges; the governor and his official staff faced financial ruin for neglecting to enforce the law.<sup>16</sup> There can be no question—all doubt about the efficacy of the laws notwithstanding<sup>17</sup>—whether the incendiary language of intolerance and oppression in official edicts set the conditions and climate that prevailed in local society and politics and—still more important—shaped how different religious groups would interact and compete.<sup>18</sup> In North Africa, for instance, the *circumcelliones*, radical groups who supported the Donatist Church, played a violent part in the religious conflicts of the region from the middle of the fourth century; toward the end of the fourth and beginning of the fifth century, they also set their sights on pagan cults and destroyed altars and sanctuaries in the countryside without any legal justification. Even ordinary Christians seem to have acted likewise.<sup>19</sup>

It would, however, be rash to connect every instance of religious conflict and its violent resolution primarily with legislation or interventions by the late-antique state in matters of religion. Such a conclusion, in fact, would completely overlook the cause of the bloodiest religious conflicts in the fourth century: internal controversy in the Christian Church. Such conflict had surprisingly less to do with doctrinal disputes than with structural changes that the success of the church had brought with it.

The dynamic expansion of the Christian Church due to the protection, privileges, and effective promotion it received from the emperors led to the establishment of an empire-wide Christianity present in every city of the empire. Local organization in Christian communities came under the authority of the bishop and clergy, who also served as unofficial administrators of the imperial religion and as important contacts of the imperial administration at the local level. The newfound importance of the local leaders of the church, above all the bishop with the growing worldly influence of his office, made their positions more

<sup>15</sup> Barnes 1989; Leppin 1999.

<sup>16</sup> Brown 1998, 638, with references. Cf. the systematic collection of anti-pagan legislation in Noethlichs 1971 as well as the analysis of the juridical treatment of sacrifice as the central pagan action from Constantine to Justinian by Trombley 1993–1994, vol. 1, 1–96.

<sup>17</sup> With respect to efficacy of anti-pagan legislation, Augustine encouraged his congregation (Augustin. *Ep.* 93.26 [PL 33, 334]; cf. *Ep.* 91.8 [PL 33, 316]): “How many among them have been led on the right path and onward to the living god, indeed, how many are converted daily!”

<sup>18</sup> Errington 1997, 233–237, 249–252 (for Theodosius). For Africa, this is also emphasized now by Shaw 2011, who diagnoses “the zealous response of freelance Christian enforcers” and sees the pagan-Christian violence of the 390s and following years as essentially analogous.

<sup>19</sup> Shaw 2004. Augustine suggests wide participation of Christians in attacks (*impetus*) on cult images; Augustin. *Ep.* 209.9 (CSEL 57, 351). Vgl. C. *Gaudent.* 1.38.51 (CSEL 53, 250): illegal attacks by Donatists and Catholics on pagan temples.



and more the object of personal ambition and, in consequence, the cause of bitter strife within the community. When ignited less by individuals than by the doctrinal views they held, these controversies could lead to acts of violence against dissidents. In a narrower sense, one might describe them as religiously motivated violence. From the point of view of the government, the violent escalation of conflicts within local communities during contested episcopal elections—even if these elections were not concerned with theological controversy—over the course of the fourth century was no less relevant.

The bloodiest conflict documented in the tradition, which broke out over the succession of Liberius, bishop of Rome, is instructive. From the beginning, it was a contest purely for power and loyalty: immediately after the death of Liberius in September 366, a battle between the supporters of the two most promising candidates cost 137 members of the community their lives. The partisans of the deacon Ursicinus and the archdeacon Damasus—rivals who, in the words of the sober historian Ammianus Marcellinus, were in their unbridled ambition *supra humanum modum ad rapiendam episcopi sedem ardent*—feuded over the course of several years.<sup>20</sup> Two aspects of Ammianus' report deserve emphasis: first, the contest is perceived as a pure power struggle for leadership of the powerful diocese of Rome and its resources. Second, orderly civic life in Rome collapsed in such spectacular fashion that the official responsible for keeping the peace in the city, the urban prefect Viventius, had to retreat to the *suburbium* of Rome.<sup>21</sup> The emperor's representative was so helpless before the breakdown of public order that he found himself unable even to initiate action to suppress the riots.

Ammianus' distanced, analytical perspective takes the point of view of the public authorities confronted by the unrest. He suppresses the fact that the conflict also had a religious dimension, albeit one primarily concerned with church law—or perhaps in his concern only for public order, he considered this

<sup>20</sup> Amm. Marc. 27.3.11.

<sup>21</sup> Amm. Marc. 27.3.11–14: "Damasus and Ursinus, who burned beyond human measure to obtain the bishopric, formed parties and carried on the conflict with great asperity, the partisans of each carrying their violence to actual battle, in which men were wounded and killed. And as Viventius was unable to put an end to, or even to soften these disorders, he was at last by their violence compelled to withdraw to the suburbs. Ultimately Damasus got the best of the strife by the strenuous efforts of his partisans. It is certain that on one day 137 dead bodies were found in the Basilica of Sicininus, which is a Christian church. And the populace who had been thus roused to a state of ferocity were with great difficulty restored to order." The church historian Socrates judges it not much differently, when he writes (*Socr. Hist. eccl.* 5.29): "Whereupon dissension arose among the people; their disagreement being not about any article of faith or heresy, but simply as to who should be bishop. Hence frequent conflicts arose, insomuch that many lives were sacrificed in this contention." On the episcopal election of 366, see most recently in detail Reutter 2009. Note also in particular Pietri 1976, 407–419; Kahlos 1997; McLynn 1992, 15–18.

aspect insignificant. An extensive dossier of texts and pamphlets that survives today, the *Collectio Avellana*, may help illuminate the religious side of the conflict. Ammianus focuses on the secular effect and on political, not religious, motives when he discusses conflicts between Christians. He seems to strive to maintain a reserved neutrality and even distance with respect to religious questions and Christian concerns, but regardless of this historiographical approach,<sup>22</sup> one must acknowledge that the “religious violence” described in particular in Christian and anti-Christian sources of the later empire—violence that engulfed not merely Christian and other religious communities but whole cities, and in isolated cases verged on a kind of local civil war—often was only superficially or partly inspired by genuinely religious motives. In many cases, religion was merely a smokescreen, if not indeed a propagandistic pretext or means of legitimation, to further the ambitions of power politics. In every documented case, our analysis must take into account the nature and weight of specific motives for the escalation of religious conflict.

It is obvious that the history of the church in the great late-antique metropolises of the East—especially Constantinople and Antioch—shows a long series of serious, often bloody conflicts over how prestigious episcopal or patriarchal sees would be filled. Doctrinal questions either played a minor part or were created by the personnel decisions of the emperor: thus, Antioch’s theological preeminence evaporated completely in the same period in which it was plagued by a century-long schism between different “orthodox” communities coexisting under their bishops; Constantinople meanwhile was home to small Christian congregations that were separate but not necessarily hostile toward one another: nine different groups in all at the end of the fourth century!<sup>23</sup> The conflicts and occasional street battles between partisans of the rivals Paulus and Macedonius (from AD 336), which in AD 359 would culminate in a massacre of over 3,000 victims at the church of Acacius, did not derive from theological differences between the followers of either contender. The installation of Macedonius as bishop of Constantinople by Constantius II in 342 and Macedonius’ subsequent engagement in ecclesiastical politics, as well as the later ecclesiastical tradition, all confirm this.

Power struggles between extremely ambitious church leaders (who in the great cities regularly derived from the civic elite) and conflicts of loyalty among the affected faithful sporadically triggered explosions of religious violence—in Constantinople, characteristically, such unrest always occurred in times of

<sup>22</sup> Matthews 1989.

<sup>23</sup> McLynn 1992 (especially on Constantinople); Isele 2010: on conflicts in Constantinople, 15–111, 195–218 (with older literature).



temporary political instability. Such conflicts, in the context of real civic *stasis*, forced the public authorities either to resort to bloody military intervention or to wait helplessly on the sidelines. It is difficult, however, to trace these orgies of violence to genuinely religious or theological motives. Christian witnesses, whether bishops involved in the conflicts or later church historians, regularly attempt to diagnose differences of belief as the causes of inner-Christian conflict, and, thus, to identify the defense of the one true faith as the continual, albeit often misdirected, driving force behind it. The perception of the pagan Julian touches upon a prominent aspect of the majority of the violent conflicts between Christians—which in turn constitute a clear majority of the violence motivated by religion or carried out in its name in the fourth century: “Even wild beasts are less savage to men than Christians are to each other.”<sup>24</sup> Such analyses have the power to show that the sharply drawn, contested lines between local religious groups in the late-antique world were not infrequently correlated with social, economic, and even “national” or ethnic differences. Religious conflict could also serve as a release for such tensions or be exploited for such purposes.<sup>25</sup> Such distinctions, insofar as they were clearly recognized at all, were of little importance to the public authorities, whether municipal officials, provincial administrators, or the imperial court: the primacy of maintaining public order generally demanded immediate intervention if the peace was threatened or unrest had to be prevented or suppressed.

Even though religious tensions between pagans and Christians and the differences between rival Christian groups in fourth-century Alexandria were virulent, the series of conflicts in the Egyptian metropolis still illustrates how secular differences and objects of contention, personal ambitions, and economic interests were entangled and overlapped. The bishop Athanasius (328–373), enemy of the Melitians (in Egypt) and of Arianism (throughout the empire), operated in his decades-long struggle with ecclesiastical enemies and with Constantius II under thinly veiled political premises: it was for political reasons that he openly made an alliance with pagan groups in Alexandria (and probably also with the Jewish population), so that he could suppress his rivals in the church, even by physical force, and maintain possession of his episcopal see. Constantius II repeatedly intervened with force in the effort to impose his ecclesiastical policies on Alexandria and depose Athanasius, but he succeeded only in forcing Athanasius underground, not into exile. In his public missives,

<sup>24</sup> Amm. Marc. 22.5.4 (paraphrasing a statement of Julian’s): *nullas infestas hominibus bestias ut sibi feralibus plerisque Christianorum expertus*.

<sup>25</sup> See detailed case studies in Hahn 2004.

the bishop depicted the attempts of the emperor to seize his person as a bloody persecution of his followers and the churches defended by them.<sup>26</sup>

The most spectacular act of religious violence in the dispute over Athanasius' see—the murder of the Arian counterbishop George of Cappadocia—was sparked by a conflict of an entirely different sort. George, a protégé of Constantius II, had allegedly planned to raise the imperial taxes, denounced leading citizens before the emperor, and seized for his own profit the lucrative monopolies of the Alexandrian church in saltpeter, papyrus, silpium, and salt, as well as the city's burial organization. Finally, and foolishly, he not only confiscated temple treasures but also threatened to close and take from the pagan population the civic temple of Tyche.<sup>27</sup> An urban mob massacred the bishop and the imperial *praepositus monetarum* of Alexandria shortly thereafter, on December 24, 361, after news of the death of Constantius II. George's death was the result of a complicated bundle of motives and undoubtedly also indicates hostility toward the emperor.<sup>28</sup> These factors would not, however, prevent George's subsequent portrayal as a martyr by Arians or (potentially) his later rise to become the most significant saint in Christendom.<sup>29</sup>

Only at first glance was the frequent, actual "distance" of the court from religious conflicts caused by geography. The nature of local conflicts fought in the name of religion often reduced imperial authorities and thus also the emperor—his prerogative in questions of religious policy notwithstanding—to the position of bystanders. Local political, economic, and social factors and forces implicated in numerous conflicts and acts of violence, especially against temples, are depicted in the tradition as strictly spiritual in nature. The destruction of holy places that were integral to the identity of a city by Christian bishops, fanatics, or even ascetics—in other words, the most extreme form of religious conflict and from the perspective of the central administration the most serious threat to public order—was far more than the ultimate escalation of a local religious controversy: such events advertised to the public the conquest, occupation, or extinction of the pagan tradition of a community

<sup>26</sup> See most recently with full references Isele 2010; Watts 2010, 178–179. On the storming of the Theonas-Church on February 8–9, 357, see also Hahn 2004, 60–64.

<sup>27</sup> The church monopolies and their seizure by George: Epiph. *Panar.* 76.1.5ff. (Holl 3, 341). Threats against the Tychaion: Amm. Marc. 22.11.7.

<sup>28</sup> On the course of events and their interpretation, see Caltabiano 1985, 17–59 (with all sources); Haas 1997 (rather uncritical); Hahn 2004, 66–74 (with further literature).

<sup>29</sup> This would be the case if George of Cappadocia were in fact (on the basis of a transfer of his relics to Diospolis in Palestine) to be identified with the soldier martyr George, who later enjoys unprecedented prominence in both the western and eastern church as a saint of soldiers and cavalry. This speculative thesis (though already suggested in 1781 by E. Gibbon in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*) has recently been represented by Woods 2009; cf. Wetzig 2007, 236.

and thereby made obsolete their traditionally interrelated political, economic, and social functions in the affected local society. Precisely the symbolic value and diverse functionality of holy places marked them as targets of the first rank for religious violence, as well as focuses of corresponding propaganda and discourses. Bishops and monks, beginning with bishop Marcus of Arethousa in the middle of the fourth century,<sup>30</sup> are transmitted to us in ecclesiastical histories and saints' lives both as temple raiders and destroyers and as victims, and thus as martyrs, of religious violence. The real motives and actions in these episodes, as well as the circumstances and extent of the use of force, are difficult to grasp in light of the propagandistic interests of the growing Christian tradition and can be tested only from case to case.<sup>31</sup> The development of literary traditions is the foremost phenomenon observable from today's point of view—the historian is often left only with considerations of plausibility.

There are good reasons not to overestimate the role of ascetics in religious conflicts and with respect to the use of violence. They doubtless played a significant role in individual regions, especially in Syria, Palestine, and Egypt, in conflicts with the pagans still resident in these areas, and violent confrontations with pagan cults (but above all with demons!)<sup>32</sup> are emphasized in the *Life* of many an important ascetic. But—perhaps with the exception of Constantinople—monks were hardly a presence in the cities of the fourth century and only in rare cases played any role in the controversies. Hagiographical flourishes, moreover, are often unmistakable, and the topical function of such episodes quickly becomes apparent: the Egyptian ascetic who is alleged to have destroyed no fewer than 365 temples meets expectations with symbolic comprehensiveness, expectations that are echoed even in an Egyptian context in only few hagiographical texts.<sup>33</sup> The evidence suggests that ascetics began to play a high-profile part in violent religious conflict only toward the end of the fourth century.<sup>34</sup>

30 Besides M. Diac. *Vit. Porph.* for the events in Gaza circa AD 402–403, the most detailed description of the destruction of a temple is found in Sozom. *Hist. eccl.* 7.15.12–15 and Theod. *Hist. eccl.* 5.21.6–15 on Apameia on the Orontes and the role of the local bishop Markellos. See Fowden 1978, 63–65; Wallraff 2011b, 165–166.

31 On the methodological difficulties of the analysis of relevant episodes, see Emmel/Gotter/Hahn 2008.

32 Brakke 2008.

33 Cf. Gabra 1983, 53–60. On the range of comparable finds, see Saradi 2008.

34 Even in the collection of monks' lives, the *Historia Religiosa* of Theodoret, dedicated to contemporary ascetics in the territory of Kyrrhos (Syria), the fight against paganism (and acts of destruction or other aggression) play only a subordinate role: Wallraff 2011b, 169. On the role of ascetics in the destruction (or rather plundering and vandalizing) of rustic sanctuaries in the vicinity of Antioch, which inspired Libanius to write his famous treatise *Pro Templis* (*Or.* 30, probably composed between 385 and 387), see now the contributions to the volume dedicated to this text (with text and German



More instructive is the fact that massive force was deployed against pagan cults in the late fourth century by ecclesiastical and public authorities jointly, namely, by the local bishop and a high-ranking imperial official—in some cases even a special delegate of the emperor. After a failed imperial attempt to destroy the civic temples of Apameia, Bishop Markellos is said to have succeeded with the support of “soldiers and gladiators.”<sup>35</sup> In Gaza, where the elite stubbornly clung to local pagan cults until shortly after AD 400, and in particular had openly celebrated the well-known cult of Marnas with sacrifices and festivals, the new bishop Porphyrios destroyed the civic temples only with the help of military support from Constantinople, which was delegated to him personally by the emperor. Porphyrios erected an imposing church as a foundation of the empress Eudoxia, allegedly on the site of Marnas’ temple. This imperial ambition to shape religious politics, however, collided with considerations of “Realpolitik”—in this case, financial considerations, something that the hagiographical tradition on the Christianization of Gaza itself reveals. The emperor first rejected the bishop’s call for violent action against the cults of Gaza, which were being defended by the local elite. He reasoned, “I know full well that this city is dedicated to idolatry; nonetheless, it loyally fulfills its tax duties and brings in high income.”<sup>36</sup> Economic and administrative considerations took precedence for the central administration in dealing with specific local conditions. The uncompromising enforcement of religious policy, which might provoke polarizing conflict and violent escalation, was hardly at the top of the court’s agenda. Under normal political conditions, exceeding the limits of what a community could bear and heavy-handed, direct intervention in its affairs against the declared will of the local elite contradicted the interest of the imperial administration in maintaining the internal balance and stability of the cities (and the uninterrupted flow of tax revenue).

The imperial response to hotspots of religious violence at the local and regional level is characterized by a farrago of temporary indifference, administrative sluggishness, and sporadic interventionism, even in the years around AD 400. State intervention in religious affairs and controversies even toward the end of the fourth and still at the beginning of the fifth centuries was most often the result of massive agitation or lobbying by local power brokers; bishops or even, as important intercessors, provincial church councils could number among them. The question of whether the power of the state or the emperor

translation) by Nesselrath 2011. On contemporary criticism, both pagan and Christian, of the violence of monks, see also the compilation of references and discussion by Gaddis 2005.

35 Sozom. *Hist. eccl.* 7.15.13. Cf. Theod. *Hist. eccl.* 5.21.6–15.

36 M. Diac. *Vit. Porph.* 41.

in distant Constantinople could be mobilized successfully hinged on such circumstances. It demanded of petitioners patience and stubborn persistence.

Few interest groups or institutions were as successful—and are, to us, as well known in detail—as the North African church. Faced with a passive provincial administration, the church of Africa Proconsularis in the late fourth and early fifth century AD resorted to incessant, determined lobbying at the imperial court seeking not only to elicit a series of laws against the Donatists and pagans but also to ensure their enforcement with public means of coercion.<sup>37</sup> Only in April 399 could the previously issued edicts be supplied the requisite force: two *comites imperatoris* were dispatched from Italy by the court with the task of closing the temples of Carthage.<sup>38</sup> Conciliar acts document these and further, protracted efforts of the bishops, with delegations leaving for Italy every few months.<sup>39</sup> The church was not content with the spectacular victory of 399. Anti-Christian violence was to be checked not only in Carthage but in all Africa; the prohibition of pagan cults was to be enforced everywhere.<sup>40</sup> This demand was put to the emperor in Ravenna by the episcopal synod in even sharper terms shortly thereafter, in response to pressure by a Christian mob on the streets of Carthage.<sup>41</sup>

The Catholic Church of North Africa made no use of the ordinary channels available, that is, the governor and the regular administrative hierarchy, in its protracted, legalistic campaign for the suppression or destruction of its religious opponents. On the contrary, its strategy was to mobilize the imperial court itself with extraordinary administrative and communicative tactics—namely, networking, embassies, and petitions—and to force the court to commit itself to long-term religious and political engagement in North Africa. This strategy, developed and successfully deployed in the decades-long struggle

37 Hermanowicz 2008; Shaw 2011, 275–280, and *passim*, as well as 517–543.

38 On the activities of imperial emissaries in AD 399, see Augustin. *Civ. Dei* 18.54: *Falsorum deorum templa everterunt et simulacra fregerunt*—surely an exaggeration made in hindsight: the temples may merely have been closed. See soon Grillo and Hahn (forthcoming).

39 Shaw 2011, 516: “The Catholic lobbying of the court in the years 404 and 405 was so intense that the court asked the Catholic Church in Africa to stop dispatching so many embassies to Italy and to Ravenna.” (*Concil. Carth. Aug. 16, 405 = Reg. Eccl. Carth. Excerpt. 11.94 D [CCL 149, 214, Munier]*). See also Merdinger 1997, 98.

40 *Concil. Carth. June 16, 401 = Reg. Eccl. Carth. Excerpt. 58 (CCL 149, 196, Munier): Instant etiam aliae necessitates religiosis imperatoribus postulandae, ut reliquias idolorum per omnem Africam jubeant penitus amputari—nam plerique in locis maritimis atque possessionibus diversis, adhuc erroris illius iniquitas viget, ut praecipiantur et ipsa deleri, et templa eorum, quae in agris vel in locis abditis constituta nullo ornamento sunt, jubeantur omnimodo destrui.*

41 *Concil. Carth. Sept. 13, 401 = Reg. Eccl. Carth. Excerpt. 84 (CCL 149, 205, Munier): Item placuit ab imperatoribus gloriosissimis peti, ut reliquiae idololatriae non solum in simulacris sed in quibuscumque locis vel lucis vel arboribus omnimodo deleantur.*

against the numerically superior Donatists, also proved effective against pagan cults, minorities, and elites: bloody confrontations between pagans and small Christian communities in Madaurus (circa AD 390 and between 400 and 410), Sufes (AD 399), and Kalama (AD 408) were reported to the imperial court by the provincial bishops (not the representatives of the affected communities) by means of petitions with attached dossiers of evidence, and measures of redress were obtained from the court, not from the provincial governor.<sup>42</sup>

The Christian tradition emphasizes the activity of imperial *notarii* and *comites*. These special delegates were dispatched to the provinces or cities from the court in possession of far-reaching executive powers. They proceeded against dissenting Christian groups with coercive means and closed their churches or cult sites; but these special officials must not distract us from the simple fact that violent imperial intervention in religious conflicts was very rare and scarcely began in the usual hierarchy of the imperial administration, particularly the local provincial governor.

Thus unfolded a religious revolution that the central administration decreed in ever-new proclamations and laws or believed it could regulate,<sup>43</sup> at times only at the initiative of a local bishop but at the cost of violence, bloody confrontation, and civic unrest. The most spectacular eruption of Christian-pagan violence in Late Antiquity—which entered the historiographical tradition of both sides as a paradigm of the conflict between the old and new religions, and which entered the cultural memory as the symbol of the ultimate decline of pagan cults in the empire—was the destruction of the Serapeum of Alexandria in AD 392. It was initiated by the bishop of the city, Theophilus. Until the very end, the imperial administration merely watched the unrest, which resembled a civil war, and the Christian destruction of the sanctuaries. Theophilus first provoked the pagan population of the city by exposing and deriding old cult objects. He then exploited the resulting pogrom-like atmosphere to wage a campaign of devastation against the Serapeum and further sanctuaries of the city, mobilizing civic Christians and monks from nearby Nitria to carry it out.

No imperial edict authorized this massive anti-pagan campaign and the destruction of the material basis of the pagan cults of Alexandria (though such authority was later claimed in the Christian tradition).<sup>44</sup> The bishop nonetheless

<sup>42</sup> See Hermanowicz 2008 (2004).

<sup>43</sup> Theodosius II remarks in a striking manner in AD 423 (*Cod. Theod.* 16.10.22): *Paganos qui supersunt, quamquam iam nullos esse credamus, promulgatarum . . . iam dudum praescripta conpescant*. “The regulations of constitutions formerly promulgated shall suppress any pagans who survive, although We now believe that there are none.”

<sup>44</sup> On this and the following, see Hahn 2008, 335–366, esp. 340–345. On the chronology important here, 368–383.



succeeded in persuading the leading imperial officials of the cities either to collaborate or do nothing. The excesses of violence and destruction had already subsided when a message from the court arrived ordering an end to the violence and attempted to dispel the atmosphere of civil war. The emperor could neither prevent nor condone the attacks, plundering, and destruction, which stood in crass contradiction to recent legislation and poisoned the political atmosphere among the religious groups in Alexandria. The local church had not merely disposed of powerful rivals that had been deeply rooted in urban life—the established civic cults. It had also exploited the temporary state of *stasis* to make an enormous gain of power, resources, and converts in the metropolis. The violent, irrevocable Christianization of the Egyptian metropolis by the church under the leadership of their confident bishop ultimately proved that public authorities had virtually no means of resisting the deliberate radicalization of religious competition and escalation of the conflict on the streets by church leaders, who mobilized believers, clerics, and ascetics prepared to use violence.

The constant exacerbation of religious politics and its aggressive language, which promoted the increasing marginalization and criminalization of persons of different religious beliefs, abetted such changes in no trifling way: the Christian faithful who participated in the destruction of pagan sacred sites or in attacks on “heretics” or Jews must have assumed that they were acting in agreement with and under the protection of the imperial religious legislation. Toward the end of the fourth century, this dynamic of religious conflict and violence, especially on the part of Christian circles, was in many places impossible to check. Precisely in the great urban metropolises, the pressure of the street—or of radical members of the community—was a force that even moderate church leaders could not underestimate.<sup>45</sup>

As urban Christian communities constantly grew and church infrastructure and organization ambitiously expanded, the authority and influence of the bishop on the local life of a community had long since ceased to be limited to spiritual leadership. His role as the contact person for civic magistrates and potentially for representatives of the regional imperial administration changed. Alongside the power of his word and the weight of his position, a church leader had at his disposal personnel resources as concrete means of exercising power in conflicts within the urban power structure—with opponents in the church,

<sup>45</sup> In various sermons, some of which had been drafted and delivered in Carthage, Augustine found himself prompted to exert a moderating influence on the Christian population, which was agitated and partly ready for violence; cf. for example, Augustin. *Serm.* 24 (AD 401). See Brown 1964; Shaw 2011, 229–232.

rival religious groups, local *potentes*, or even high officials of the emperor. The extent of these resources varied greatly from city to city, but they could sometimes possess considerable clout. This potential recruiting ground was a force that not only local officials had to reckon with. Even the imperial administration in the great administrative centers of the East could be intimidated and neutralized by loyal, well-organized, and violent partisans of the bishop, drawn from the clergy, congregation, and monks. This development would have profound effects on the ambitions and exercise of power by the emperor and on the mechanisms of political life in the empire as a whole.

Once again, Egyptian Alexandria is the place where the ecclesiastical potential for violence—in the hands of a confident and unscrupulous church leader—can best be observed and analyzed. The weakness and even the helplessness of the imperial officials were revealed in the power struggle with Cyril (414–444) that erupted over the treatment of the religious minorities in the city—first the Novatians, then the Jewish population. The conflict was ostensibly a continuation of religious conflicts that Cyril had stirred up between 412 and 415, immediately after he had taken office, and violently “resolved.” But already the contemporary church historian Socrates recognized that “from that time (i.e., Cyril’s election) the bishopric of Alexandria went beyond the limits of its sacerdotal functions, and assumed the administration of secular matters.”<sup>46</sup>

The conflict with the important Jewish segment of the population, which broke out over theater productions and was presented to the current *praefectus Aegypti* in Alexandria as a matter pertaining to public order, was exacerbated at the instigation of an urban cleric closely associated with Cyril. His public condemnation by the prefect and the humiliating reprimand and threats subsequently directed at the Jewish elders by the patriarch led to nighttime acts of violence against Christians by the enraged Jewish mob. Without waiting for the civic officials or the imperial prefect to intervene, the bishop (in an impressive act of mobilization, which illustrates how highly organized the Alexandrian church and its adherents were under Cyril) placed himself at the head of a Christian mob at dawn, seized the synagogues, and drove all Jews from the city. He gave their possessions to the mob to plunder. The smoldering power struggle between the patriarch and the prefect was now conducted in public; attempts at negotiations failed.

Cyril not only enjoyed the support of a Christian mob in this conflict, but in the coming conflicts he also mobilized a guard of toughs unconditionally loyal to himself—the veneer of religious conflict thereby rapidly wore thin.

<sup>46</sup> Socr. *Hist. eccl.* 7.7.4.

Five hundred monks who had settled in the nearby wasteland of Nitria, “being transported with an ardent zeal, resolved to fight on behalf of Cyril,” moved to Alexandria and attacked the *praefectus Aegypti* Orestes in his carriage on the open street—first with insults, then with stones. Only the courageous intervention of the population saved this official’s life; his guard had abandoned him. Soon afterward, Christian thugs led by a *lector* of the church ambushed the esteemed philosopher Hypatia, gruesomely killed her, and dismembered her corpse before the main church of the city because she was on good terms with the prefect and the city magistrates and had opposed the reconciliation of the bishop and the prefect.<sup>47</sup>

These episodes deserve a much more detailed discussion than is possible here.<sup>48</sup> The discrepancy between the bishop, who could exert force through his adherents systematically and comprehensively in different parts of the city, apparently *ad libitum*, and civic and imperial authorities, who were unable to resist and keep the peace with their own executive resources, casts a revealing light on the distribution and readiness of the real instruments of power in Alexandria. The altercations illustrated—whether with the tiny Christian community of the Novatians or with the large population of Jews—are foremost facets of a power struggle between Cyril and the secular institutions of the city for control of public life. The representative of the emperor, the *praefectus Augustalis* Orestes, seems here to be the chief opponent and victim. His only recorded reaction to the *de facto* rule of the bishop and ecclesiastics on the street consisted in the repeated dispatch of reports to the emperor. Immediately after the expulsion of the Jews and the attack on the prefect, the bishop in turn sent reports of his own to the court to present his versions of the riots. Thus, he was apparently able to neutralize the accusations raised against him.<sup>49</sup> The aggressive and provocative attitude of the patriarch before the imperial prefect (for which he met with resistance also in his church and in Alexandria) culminated in the elevation of the monk who had seriously injured the prefect with a stone and been seized by the people, delivered to the authorities, and executed, in the official list of local martyrs.<sup>50</sup> Without any doubt, the bishop

47 Socrates, the church historian and our most important source, closes his report of this act of violence with the reserved statement: “This affair brought not the least opprobrium not only upon Cyril, but also upon the whole Alexandrian church” (Socr. *Hist. eccl.* 7.15).

48 For an introduction, with extensive documentation and secondary literature, see Hahn 2004, 106–114.

49 Socr. *Hist. eccl.* 7.13.19 (apparently on the basis of the reports of Orestes und Cyril). Cyril blamed the Jews for the uprising and the outbreak of violence. There is no word of a penalty or rebuke of the bishop on the part of the imperial court. See also Haas 1997, 299–304.

50 Socr. *Hist. eccl.* 7.14.



even misrepresented the violent act of an ascetic and his own provocation of the imperial administration in terms of religious conflict and did not shrink from alleging a persecution of Christians. Not only before his own congregation but also before the imperial court, the patriarch propagated and legitimated the open conflict and the bloodshed that he himself had caused in his power struggle with the head of the imperial administration for dominance in the metropolis as religiously motivated and intended solely for the defense of the faith, the church, and its faithful.

A further aspect of the unscrupulous power politics of the patriarch must have seemed to the imperial court at least as alarming as the excesses of violence that he had apparently inspired and coordinated in the capital of Egypt: Cyril posed an extraordinary threat to public security and order in the metropolis not only because of the hordes of monks in nearby Nitria and fanatical members of his congregation; there were also numerous, capable men ready for street fighting within his own church organization, thus institutionalized and publicly tolerated. The *parabalani*—sick-bearers and caretakers in the service of the church<sup>51</sup>—are not named explicitly in any contemporary source as the men who were responsible for the massacre of Hypatia, but there are good reasons to assume that they were. An imperial edict issued twenty-two months after the murder of the philosopher makes explicit what disruptive potential this group of more than 500 men—organized as a *corpus*, considered part of the clergy (with corresponding privileges), and subordinate to the patriarch—embodied, and what a threat to the public life of the city (the text of the edict speaks openly of *terror*) emanated from this violent, ever-ready troop of the bishop.

The background of the imperial proclamation itself is more than unusual: the emperor flatly rejects an official petition, made by the patriarch and delivered by a delegation from Alexandria—apparently in favor of the *parabalani*, but of unknown content because of a lacuna. He qualifies the petition and its various requests as *inutilis*. At the outset, the emperor condemns the specific petition in no uncertain terms: “This claim was inserted in the petition of the delegation because of the terror of those who are called attendants of the sick” (*parabalani*). Next, before announcing further stipulations, he states, “Clerics shall have nothing to do with public affairs and with matters pertaining to the municipal council.”<sup>52</sup> In the following, not only is the number of *parabalani* fixed at 500, their recruitment limited to the poor of the city, and the entire

51 Fundamental on the *parabalani*, Philipsborn 1950, 185–190; Schubart 1954, 97–101; Bowersock 2010; and now Hahn 2014 (in print).

52 *Cod. Theod.* 16.2.42 *praef.*

selection process placed in the control of the *praefectus Augustalis* (instead of the bishop) and put under review by the praetorian prefect, but this is also decreed on threat of penalty: “We do not grant the aforesaid attendants of the sick liberty to attend any public spectacle whatever or to enter the meeting place of a municipal council or a courtroom.”

The harsh wording of this remarkable constitution makes crystal clear that not merely the street but all spaces of political life in Alexandria—from the theater to the courts to the sessions of the civic council—were plagued by this episcopal brigade of clerics, and the formation of public opinion and decision-making had been grossly manipulated through the threat or use of violence at the whim of the patriarch. It is illuminating that conditions in the Egyptian metropolis were not decried by the delegation from the council; indeed, it appears that a decree drafted by the bishop himself was represented to the court as a civic desire—in this way the *terror* reached all the way to Constantinople. But the imperial court, doubtless on the basis of the reports sent by the administration in Alexandria (not least from the *praefectus Augustalis* Orestes), had formed its own opinion of the prevailing security situation in the metropolis of Egypt and the resulting political conditions. But even the court—harsh words and decisive, effective administrative measures against the *parabalani* notwithstanding—did not dare to name the church or bishop, much less hold him responsible.<sup>53</sup>

The *parabalani* as the loyal strike force or toughs of the bishop are by no means an isolated phenomenon of the early episcopate of Cyril or Alexandria. They are no more a phenomenon of the early fifth century, even if we can perceive them especially well here.<sup>54</sup> The broad institutional existence of such distinct groups of “roughnecks” in the pay of the church, usually numbering among the lower ranks of the clergy, should be recognized as a factor for the use or outbreak of “religious violence.” While *parabalani* are attested only for Alexandria,<sup>55</sup> groups or persons with similar functions but different names operated in all the larger churches. Thus the bishop of Antioch could rely on strong men from the *corpus* of *lecticarii*, the pallbearers, in situations

53 Just sixteen months later, for reasons unknown, a large part of the restrictions proclaimed on September 29, 416, was withdrawn along with *Cod. Theod.* 16.2.43; the permissible number of *parabalani* raised to 600; and, most important, the troop was once again placed under the command of the bishop.

54 Cyril’s successor, Dioscuros, numbered them in his entourage for the visit of the Second Council of Ephesus in 449; their vigorous support of the cause of their patriarch helped this council win the epithet *latrocinium* or “Robber Council.” ACO 2.1.1.176. Cf. also a further relevant description, though without naming names, in ACO 2.1.2.51 (Council of Chalcedon AD 451).

55 An isolated late source (sixth/seventh c.) derives from Oxyrhynchos and lists the *parabalani* among other clergy (including *philoponoï* and gravediggers): *P. Iand.* 8.154. Cf. Haas 1997, 50.

of conflict.<sup>56</sup> Gravediggers (*fossores*) were indispensable in every church and ranked as lower clergymen.<sup>57</sup> In Rome, with its extensive Christian catacombs, which had been growing since the early third century, a large *corpus* of *fossores* existed. Pope Damasus deployed its members in the bloody confrontations with his competitor Ursicinus in the year 366. Across the empire, the ecclesiastical burial personnel and the lower clergy otherwise employed in caring for the poor represented an episcopal militia in an urban setting that could be mobilized easily at any time. The involvement of the bishop in the urban order was, thus, ambiguous: “The bishops are the controllers of the crowds, and anxious for peace, unless, of course, they are moved by some offence against God, or insult to the Church,” declares Ambrose of Milan before Theodosius I.<sup>58</sup> Neither the empire nor the emperor, but rather the church, and at the local level the bishop, claim the authority to decide when peace and order may reign in both religious and public life. On this reading, the secular order would be subordinate to religion; the emperor would have to acknowledge a higher, namely a Christian, power for the sake of the faith and the church and moreover yield to the counsel of a bishop.

From about the middle of the fourth century, Christian religious violence eroded the monopoly of the late-antique state on the legitimate use of force. This can be illustrated and observed nowhere better than in the fate of the Jewish population in the fourth and first third of the fifth centuries. The imperial religious policy here—with respect to tradition, self-understanding, ideology, influences, and efficacy—undergoes a veritable stress test. The fundamental positions, framework, and development of imperial policy and its local implementation may be observed over a span of decades on a broad basis of normative, narrative, literary, and archaeological sources. Study of the public protection of the Jews—and more specifically the synagogues—from Christian suppression and persecution in the years between AD 388 and 423 shows in striking fashion the failure of the late-antique state to implement its laws and the futility of the effort to enforce the explicit wish of the emperor in a specific local case. Various attempts to protect Jewish communities and synagogues from the attacks of the Christian mob or local church and its bishop in this period failed entirely. Due to the pressure exerted by those forces that had

<sup>56</sup> Flemming/Hoffmann 1917, 118, 133. Life of John of Tella, in Brooks 1907, 55.

<sup>57</sup> In Constantinople, since Constantine the church had employed over 1100 *decani* as gravediggers to bury the poor. Their numbers were reduced to 850 in the meantime, then under Athanasius built up again; further organizational and financial arrangements were also made. *Nov.* 48 *praef.*; cf. *Cod. Iust.* 1.2.9 and 11.18.1; cf. Hahn 2014 (in print).

<sup>58</sup> Ambr. *Ep.* 40(32).6: *sacerdotes enim turbarum moderatores sunt, studiosi pacis, nisi cum et ipsi moveantur iniuria dei, aut ecclesiae contumelia.*



initially used violence against Jewish communities and property, the relevant legislation became meaningless and was ultimately adapted to the balance of power in the street. In consequence, the conditions of existence for the Jewish minority in the empire drastically worsened.

In the context of late-antique religious conflict, this outcome is of great importance—above all because under the Theodosian dynasty, within the shortest period of time, the state could no longer defend even uncontested and traditional religious guarantees and rights against attacks from within the ranks of the Christian Church, which had come to power (and an often unbridled will to power) in just two generations. Despite incipient restrictions, the legal situation of the Jews and Jewish communities under Constantine and his successors, based on centuries-old Roman tradition and legislation, was essentially secure and undisputed: Jews' right to practice their religion and their property (such as synagogues) were, along with limited legal autonomy and self-government, unassailable. The conversion of Christians—even slaves—to Judaism and mixed marriages were now prohibited, but the fundamental protection of the Jews' right to practice their religion was never abandoned in Late Antiquity.<sup>59</sup> Still, Christian-Jewish tensions that arose in individual places and regions—by no means in the whole empire—and were exacerbated by Emperor Julian's promotion of Judaism<sup>60</sup> exploded in open attacks on Jewish synagogues from the late 380s on. Shortly after the first such incident in Rome,<sup>61</sup> the most notorious occurred in Callinicum on the Euphrates: at the instigation, if not even under the personal leadership of the local bishop, a Jewish synagogue, along with a meeting place of the heretical Valentinians, was attacked and burned down by monks and a Christian mob. Theodosius, who received notice of this serious breach of public order—which satisfied the description of *seditio*, an insurrection—from the *comes Orientis*, without hesitation ordered that the perpetrators should be punished, all stolen holy implements be restored, and the synagogue be rebuilt at the expense of the bishop, namely, the local church.<sup>62</sup>

59 The best study—with reproduction and commentary of all relevant late-antique texts—is Linder 1987. See also Rabello 1980.

60 Christian authors mention, especially in connection with Julian's attempted restoration, various incidents of anti-Christian Jewish attacks in the eastern half of the empire, but these reports—often contaminated with outbreaks of pagan or heretical violence against “Catholic” communities—are problematic in their critical appraisal; Hahn 2002.

61 The destruction of a Roman synagogue in 387 or 388 (Ambr. *Ep.* 74[40].23) deserves mention because the usurper Magnus Maximus, whose religious policy unambiguously strengthened the orthodoxy opposed to heretical groups, sent an edict to Rome that outlawed violence against synagogues—and if we believe Ambrose, that cost him the support of the Christians in the ongoing civil war; cf. Noethlichs 1971, 182–188.

62 Ambr. *Ep.* 74(40).6–33 (CSEL 82, 2, 58–73) with the report. See Parkes 1934, 166–168, 187; Simon 1986, 226 (“the most famous and the most characteristic episode”); Fowden 1978, 67 and 77–78. There

It is not the attack in distant Callinicum per se that gives this confrontation such fundamental importance for the present study; it is the vehement apologia by Ambrose, bishop of the imperial city Milan, delivered in a sermon before the emperor and later sent to him by letter, the subsequent reversal of Theodosius, and his retreat from the punitive measures that he had already ordered. The illegal use of violence against the synagogue of Callinicum may be viewed as representative of the countless other cases of (principally Christian) attacks on cult sites, groups, and practices, which had increasingly determined the religio-political climate in the empire for decades.<sup>63</sup> The highly rhetorical exposition of Ambrose in particular presents the first blatant, systematic Christian justification of the use of violence against other religious groups and their cult sites. At the same time, Ambrose challenges the right and duty of the state to suppress and punish every uprising with the means at its disposal. Indeed, in the case of “justified” Christian violence, he fundamentally contests the right of the ruler to interfere. Ambrose declares the violence against the Jewish synagogue a commandment of the Christian faith, a question of religion that trumps the imperative of the state for public order: *Sed disciplinae te ratio, imperator, movet. Quid igitur est amplius? Disciplinae species, an causa religionis? Cedat oportet censura devotioni*—and in a later passage he evokes *leges Romanae* in the sense of public order.<sup>64</sup> To force the bishop of Callinicum to rebuild the destroyed synagogue—defamed by Ambrose as *perfidiae locus, impietatis domus, amentiae receptaculum, quod Deus damnavit ipse*—would amount to making him either an apostate, if he obeyed, or a martyr, if he refused and were punished.<sup>65</sup> By claiming to have given the command himself instead of the local bishop and by thus taking responsibility for the burning of the synagogue, Ambrose transforms this act of destruction on the

is an excellent study by Palanque 1933, 205–227. On the synagogue destruction of Callinicum in 388, see most recently Gotter 2011, whom my analysis here follows in part.

63 For the relevant material, see above all Trombley 1993–1994; Hahn 2004; Gaddis 2005; Hahn et al. 2008; Isele 2010.

64 Ambr. *Ep.* 74(40).11: “But perhaps, the cause of discipline moves you, O emperor. Which, then, is of greater importance, the show of discipline or the cause of religion?”—characteristically Ambrose (ibid. 23) condemns the intervention of the usurper Magnus Maximus in Rome, after the local synagogue was burned down, with the words *quasi vindex disciplinae publicae* (“allegedly vindicating public order”). Ambrose follows up the accusation that the Jews arbitrarily ignored Roman *leges* with the rhetorical question (*Ep.* 74[40].21): *ubi erant istae leges, cum incenderent ipsi sacratarum basilicarum culmina?*—“Where were those laws when they themselves set fire to the roofs of the sacred basilicas?”

65 Ambr. *Ep.* 74(40).7: *Necesse erit igitur ut aut praevaricatorem aut martyrem faciat: utrumque alienum temporibus tuis, utrumque persecutionis instar, si aut praevaricari cogatur, aut subire martyrium. Vides quo inclinet causae exitus.* Cf. the pointed conclusion of Poinssotte 2001, 46: “L’argumentation (§§ 8–10), passant du plain du droit des gens à celui du droit divin, développe le motif du martyre *ab absurdo*.”

distant Euphrates into a principal question of faith. He defines what occurred in Callinicum as a legitimate religious conflict with legitimate Christian use of force to ensure the true faith and refuses to describe it as a case primarily affecting the political order or as a genuinely secular problem that the emperor might “legally” solve with his monopoly of force. The right of the emperor to enforce order and exact obedience runs against a higher power: “God is feared more than men, Who is rightly set before even emperors. . . . deference should be paid to God, and He should be preferred to all.”<sup>66</sup>

The conflict between Theodosius and Ambrose, the emperor and his bishop, over the treatment of the Christian attackers of Callinicum and the restoration of the destroyed synagogue, which ended with the retraction of all the imperial proclamations and the virtual acquittal of the perpetrators, illustrates one more thing: the emperor, the *pontifex maximus* of the pagan empire, who as ruler not only stood under the protection of the gods but was also their pre-eminent sacred intermediary and the priestly mediator of their goodwill toward the empire and humanity, now finds himself in a wholly different power balance and a wholly different role, which would have profound consequences on his authority and understanding of his position as ruler. A bishop, a Christian priest, on his own cognizance confronts him now as the authoritative interpreter of the one God and, because he follows only the commandments of God (*mandata*) in his actions,<sup>67</sup> as the virtual mediator of God’s authority and mercy; and he declares to Theodosius that as a good Christian (and Christian ruler) he should heed the warnings of his bishop for his own good (and for that of the empire). It is no coincidence that Ambrose warns the emperor that he may forfeit his God-given invincibility if he should disregard those warnings, and he reminds Theodosius of the recent victories of his latest campaigns, which are owed to Christ himself. In the rhetorical elaboration of his blatant contradiction of Theodosius’ reaction to the events in Callinicum—and in the context of the justification of Christian violence against persons of different faiths—Ambrose develops the principles of a political theory that would blossom in the future and have its powerful historical effect in later centuries.

Ambrose may have prevailed in all respects in the controversy over Callinicum,<sup>68</sup> but the problem of public violence and order was by no means solved—if indeed the triumph of the bishop did not lead to violent acts in

66 Ambr. Ep. 74(40).28: *caeterum plus hominibus Deus timetur, qui etiam imperatoribus iure praeferitur . . . deferendum Deo, et eum praeferendum omnibus. . . .*

67 Ambr. Ep. 74(40).3: . . . *Non ergo importunus indebitis me intersere, alienis ingero: sed debitum obtempero, mandatis Dei nostri obedio. Quod facio primum tui amore, tui gratia . . .*

68 Ambrose later wrote to his sister that he had been able to achieve everything he had attempted: Ambr. Ep. extra coll. 1(41).28.



imitation in many places. Numerous attacks on synagogues in the following years, especially in the East, are attested before AD 423.<sup>69</sup> On September 29, 393, Theodosius issued a law in his and his sons' names, which succinctly stated that no law prohibits the Jewish religion, that the prohibition of Jewish meetings was forbidden, and above all that those *qui sub christiana religionis nomine illicita . . . destruere synagogas adque expoliare conantur* would be prosecuted with all severity.<sup>70</sup> The destruction, confiscation, and conversion of synagogues into churches had become such a widespread phenomenon that a specific administrative and empire-wide clarification and process seemed necessary to check the attacks. But the six laws<sup>71</sup> of identical or similar content that followed close on one another in the years thereafter make all too obvious that this hectic legislation was ineffective—a fact that is attested precisely and impressively even in archaeological finds from Syrian Apamea (as well as in Macedonian Stobi).<sup>72</sup> The centrally located, spacious synagogue, which was still adorned with beautiful floor mosaics in AD 391, was razed to the ground shortly after the turn of the century; a church was erected on the site, whereby the centuries-old, traditional Jewish holy site was not only erased but also triumphantly overwritten.<sup>73</sup> The series of laws cited earlier shows only a reactionary legislative effort of the Roman state: the imperial court is moved by the petitions of the affected Jewish communities or their patrons to affirm again and again the known legislation (also pertinent in civil law), which declares the inviolability of the synagogues. But what emerges most clearly is the inability of the court to implement this norm locally against aggressive Christian or indeed ecclesiastical circles and the futility of the effort to protect the synagogues effectively from attacks, destruction, and even confiscation. The legislation is racing to catch up to reality in the places affected—and it generally lacks the means of enforcement against the resistance of local powers. In Syria, the vociferous protests of the church force the court in June 423 to suspend the last protection law

69 A compilation of references to anti-Jewish outbreaks of violence and the destruction of synagogues can be found in Juster 1914, vol. 1, 464 n. 3; Cracco Ruggini 1959, 205–207; Parkes 1934, 187, 212–214, 230, 236–238, 250–251. For the transformation of the synagogue of Apamea into a Christian church, see following text. The destruction of synagogues by the Syrian monk-leader Barsauma in Palestine in the first half of the fifth century is recorded only in a few paraphrases of the extensive *vita* (which I plan to edit together with Volker Menze and Andrew Palmer): Nau 1913, 272–276, 379–389; 1914, 113–134, 278–289; Nau 1927.

70 *Cod. Theod.* 16.8.9.

71 They are *Cod. Theod.* 16.8.12 (June 17, 397); *Cod. Theod.* 16.8.20 (July 26, 412); *Cod. Theod.* 16.8.21 (Aug. 6, 420); *Cod. Theod.* 16.8.25 (Feb. 15, 423); *Cod. Theod.* 16.8.26 (April 9, 423). On these laws, see Linder 1987 *passim*, as well as Rabello 1980.

72 Millar 1992, 100: synagogue destroyed before the end of the fourth century and replaced by a church.

73 Brenk 1991; Noy 2007.

for the diocese Oriens.<sup>74</sup> There exists, however, no recorded case in which effective protection was given and a synagogue was secured from a Christian mob or the Roman army intervened. No violent attack is known in consequence of which punitive measures were applied rigorously in accordance with the law. Moreover, the wording of that series of protection laws attests to how greatly the religio-political climate had changed to the disadvantage of the Jews over that short time, and how anti-Judaic sentiment set the tone of the imperial decrees ever more.<sup>75</sup>

The limits of imperial action against Christian perpetrators of religious violence were vividly illustrated to the population of the empire in the spectacular confrontation between Ambrose and Theodosius in Milan AD 388 over the reaction to the events in Callinicum. For the first time, a publicly recognized justification of the legitimacy of Christian violence against cult buildings of Jews and the unorthodox was offered. The powerlessness of Christian rulers, their inability to enforce their monopoly of force and the executive power of the empire against any form of public disturbance, and so also against religiously motivated violence, was manifest from now on. The momentum that this paradigm shift would gain is breathtaking: a religious community that had been respected, privileged, and protected for centuries was marginalized within a few decades, robbed of its meeting and cult sites with naked force, and increasingly driven from the public face of their cities, if not expelled from them, as were the Alexandrian Jews by bishop Cyril.

If Constantine and his successors up to the Theodosian dynasty had hoped their conversion to Christianity, their massive promotion of the church, and the establishment of a Christian state religion would strengthen their position as absolute monarchs and give the empire a new ideological basis that would stabilize its society and their rule, they were—from the perspective of the problem treated here—fundamentally mistaken. The disappearance of the imperial cult, previously instrumental for imperial relations with local elites and subjects in the provinces, made the religiously based integration of monarchic rule in local societies obsolete. Above all, the disappearance of the

74 The legislation to provide protection or compensation for synagogues seized by Christians, initiated by the pretorian prefect Asclepiodotos in AD 423 (*Cod. Theod.* 16.8.25–27) met with bitter protests in Antioch: Symeon the Stylite pressed Theodosius II with a threatening letter and won the annulment or suspension of the law. *Vit. Symeon.* 130–131 (Hilgenfeld, 174–175); Evagr. *Hist. eccl.* 1.13.

75 The wording of *Cod. Theod.* 16.8.26 (April 9, 423) is especially instructive, which is nakedly aggressive and threatens penalties for the circumcision of non-Jews alongside the order for protection. Millar 2004 emphasizes the increase of Jewish-Christian tensions, provocation, and violence—and the corresponding defamation or rumors—that characterized the local coexistence of religious communities at least in Syria.

imperial cult robbed the emperor of his omnipresence in public occasions as the active mediator and guarantor of divine favor and moreover as a privileged cult object in sacred life and in the monumental landscape of every single community of the empire. The conversion of Constantine entailed no less than a comprehensive desacralization and delegitimation of the emperor in the field of religion. But that was not all: the area of religion gained unprecedented autonomy, stubbornly removed itself from imperial control and authority, and became increasingly defined and supplied by the church and the prerogative of the bishops. The growth of the Christian Church itself, the formation of an efficient church organization, and its claim to authority, which soon extended beyond the purview of religion, created decisive conditions for the increase of religious and social polarization and the outbreak of serious conflicts in cities and rural communities. But these conflicts, which were carried out under alleged or pretended religious motives, often reflect, as can be seen, personal ambitions, and they equally indicate economic interests and social tensions that could now find legitimate expression in the Christian empire. The disruptive, disintegrating potential of religious conflict in the public life of Late Antiquity is obvious—but the legitimation of Christian violence, even in contradiction with the imperial monopoly of force and the indisputable primacy of the public peace, and its eventual toleration by the emperors counts among the groundbreaking events of the religio-political discourse that was dictated by the church in the context of the Christianization and religious controversies of the fourth century. The phenomenon of religious violence, which is a symptomatic trait of Late Antiquity—and in particular the fourth and early fifth centuries—marks not only a profound threat to public life in this era. It also articulates an extraordinary challenge to the self-understanding of the emperors and the imperial order: for the *pax Augusta*, for the ideology of the rulers, and for imperial politics.