



## Persecution and Conflict in Mediterranean Religions

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**Friday, October 31-Saturday, November 1**

*Mershon Center  
1501 Neil Avenue  
Columbus, Ohio 43201*

### **Friday, October 31**

9:00-9:15: coffee

9:15-9:30: opening remarks

9:30-11:30: Session One

Moderator: **Daniel Frank**, Near Eastern Languages and Cultures

**Michael Swartz**, Near Eastern Languages and Cultures, "The Case of the Heretical High Priest: Remembering Internal Conflict in Rabbinic and Synagogue Literature"

**John Collins**, Yale University, "Anti Semitism in Antiquity? The Case of Alexandria"

11:30-1:30: *Lunch Break*

1:30-2:30: Session Two

Moderator: **Matt Goldish**, History

**David Frankfurter**, University of New Hampshire, "Spaces of Crisis, Locations for Destruction: Violent Christianization in Late Antique Egypt"

2:30-3:00: *Coffee Break*

3:00-5:00: Session Three

Moderator: **Victoria Wohl**, Greek and Latin

**Robin Osborne**, King's College, Cambridge, "Pluralism, Democracy and the Limits of Tolerance in the Greek Polis"

**Elizabeth Castelli**, Barnard College, "Persecution and Spectacle: Cultural Appropriation in the Christian Commemoration of Martyrdom"

5:00-6:30: *General Discussion*

### **Saturday, November 1**

9:00-9:15: Coffee

9:15-11:15: Session Four

Moderator: **Lindsay Jones**, Comparative Studies

**Steven Wasserstrom**, Reed College, "Hermes the Monotheist"

**Paul Heck**, Princeton, "Eschatological Scripturalism and the End of Community"

11:15-1:00: *Lunch Break*

1:00-3:00: Session Five

Moderator: **Sarah Iles Johnston**, Greek and Latin

**Mary Beard**, Newnham College, Cambridge, "The Triumph of Persecution"

**Fritz Graf**, Ohio State, "Religious Transgression and Judicial Violence: The Cases of Alcibiades and Andocides"

3:00-3:30: *Coffee Break*

3:30-5:30: Session Six

Moderator: **Hugh Urban**, Comparative Studies

**Jason BeDuhn**, Northern Arizona University: "Manichaeism and the Logic of Persecution"

**Bruce Lincoln**, University of Chicago: "Rebellion and Treatment of Rebels in the Achaemenian Empire"

5:30-6:30: General Discussion.

This event is sponsored by The Mershon Center, with cooperation of the Department of Greek and Latin, the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures, The Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies and the Institute for Collaborative Research and Public Humanities.

## Prospectus

From the web site for Mediterranean Religions, <http://cohums.ohio-state.edu/medrel/>:

Religiously motivated violence is far from a new phenomenon, especially in the lands surrounding the Mediterranean. During and preceding the development of the three major monotheisms (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), holy wars, persecution of heresies, and other forms of religiously motivated violence manifested themselves in diverse forms. Indeed, already in the 14th century BCE, the Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaten imposed a new, fiercely monotheistic and intolerant religion (the so-called "Amarna religion") upon his polytheistic countrymen—the first instance, to our knowledge, of religious persecution in the history of Mediterranean religions.

In later periods, the Romans persecuted several groups, ostensibly for religious reasons, including the Carthaginians, the Druids and the Jews (the Carthaginians and the Druids because they performed human sacrifices and the Jews because they refused to worship the Emperor), although issues of Imperial governance underlay many incidents such as that of Bar Kochba rebellion in the early second century. Religion, then, in addition to provoking problems in itself, also served as an excuse for the suppression of indigenous resistance against Imperial government. The Romans also, of course, martyred Christians.

During the pre-state period in Israel, when tribes had to defend themselves against their neighbors, YHWH was imagined as a divine warrior who fought in their support, stirring up army commanders with his spirit, indicating the right moment for attack and confusing enemies by miracles and terror. The term "people of YHWH" appears first in such military contexts: those so called were expected to risk their life in solidarity with God. Very early during the Christian movement, leaders developed a concept of "heresy," (formal heresiologies began to be constructed in the late second century), and the early Church formed the Episcopate in part to combat heresy by whatever means were necessary, including violent attacks on rival sects (e.g., the Abbot Shenoute's plundering and destruction of "heretical" villages in fifth century Egypt). In 297 CE, the Emperor Diocletian prescribed the death penalty for Manichaeans and in the fourth century the Priscillianists suffered the same fate.

In contrast, some ancient Mediterranean cultures seem to have tolerated—even embraced—religious diversity. In antiquity, the famous phrase "the thousand gods of Hatti" referred to the ease with which the Hittites adopted the deities of peoples whom their empire incorporated. The Greeks, too, adopted gods whom they encountered in foreign lands, when those gods seemed useful (e.g., Cybele, Isis, Adonis) and, although the Greeks sometimes commented upon the unusual characteristics of foreign religions which they did not adopt, they failed to censure anything but the most unusual practices (e.g., human sacrifice). Even here, it was in myth far more than in reality that the Greeks made any attempt to stop the practices: Heracles killed the Egyptian king Busiris upon the altar he had used to sacrifice unfortunate visitors, but the case of Socrates is the only instance, in real life, of Greeks executing an individual in part because of his religious beliefs.

Israelite religion, including early forms of Judaism, also tolerated diversity: until theology began to develop in the seventh century BCE, priests were little interested in what individual members of their group did or believed. Islam quickly developed a strong army and set out to acquire new territories in the interest of advancing Muslim power: it also divided the world into the House of Islam and the House of War (the latter comprising all non-Muslims). Nonetheless, early forms of Islam were strikingly tolerant of other forms of monotheism (particularly Christianity and Judaism) and, perceiving polytheism to be only a minor threat, left its adherents alone for the most part. It was only in the late seventh century that anti-Christian propaganda began to appear, inter alia in the form of slogans inscribed on the Dome of the Rock, and it was many centuries later that Muslims began persecuting other religions in earnest.

As the sketch just offered begins to demonstrate, the question of why some ancient Mediterranean cultures tended toward religious tolerance and others tended in the opposite direction is a complex one. It is our expectation that in the course of the conference, we will gain a better understanding of what motivated some ancient Mediterranean cultures to practice forms of religious tolerance and others to persecute adherents of foreign religions, and perhaps also acquire insights as to what drives contemporary religious intolerance in the Mediterranean area. Among the subtopics that we may discuss are:

**Monotheism vs. Polytheism:** Are monotheistic religions by their nature less tolerant and thus more liable to engage in conflict? On the one hand it could be argued that polytheistic religions, particularly such as we find in ancient Greece, Rome, Anatolia, and the Near East, are more tolerant of religious difference for two reasons: 1) although most forms of polytheism postulate a "king" or "head" god (e.g., Zeus, Re), they divide power and responsibilities among numerous gods; typically, this makes them open to adopting new gods from other cultures whom they encounter; 2) in polytheistic systems, each city-state usually honors one particular god above the others, and calls its gods by slightly different names. Such variety within local pantheons leads to acceptance of a broad variety of beliefs and practices. On the other hand, as mentioned above, some polytheistic cultures, such as the Romans, engaged in religious persecution, and some forms of monotheism (such as early Islam) were tolerant, which indicates that the impetus behind religious violence cannot be ascribed to monotheism alone.

**Fundamentalism:** As Andrew Sullivan incisively discussed in an article in the New York Times Magazine (Oct. 7, 2001), it is often not religious adherence per se but rather radical fundamentalism that leads to religious violence in the contemporary world. To what extent can we 1) identify behaviors that can be called "fundamentalist" in ancient religions and 2) ascribe religious violence to ancient forms of fundamentalism?

**Theology:** Many ancient Mediterranean religions had no theology—that is,

there were no sacred books or documents, in which desired beliefs and behavioral patterns could be spelled out for adherents. Everyone knew, within general guidelines, how to perform the basic acts required by the religion (e.g. sacrifice) but there was no single explanation for why these acts had to be performed or even any agreed upon expectation as to what would happen if they were not. To what extent did the canonization of belief and practice, through the development and promulgation of an official theology, support religious violence? A closely related topic is the development of an official priesthood (vel sim.), whose roles sometimes—but by no means always—included enforcing the dictates of a theology.

Eschatologies: Expectation of a blessed afterlife (either on an individual basis, immediately after death, or communal, following the end of world) can encourage adherents of a religion to defend or champion it more vigorously. Conversely, the expectation of post-mortem punishment not only for sinners, but also for sin-free members of a community that tolerates sinners, drives adherents to expunge heresy more vigorously. To what extent can certain types of eschatological beliefs be connected with religious violence in the ancient Mediterranean?

Construction of Community: Potentially related to the foregoing is the desire to construct religiously homogenous communities among the living; sometimes these communities subsequently shut themselves off from the rest of the world and begin to construct their identities in contrast to the outside world (e.g., Abbot Shenoute's monastery; various groups among the Jews and Christians such as the Essenes). Were such communities by their nature given to intolerance? How often did the intolerance erupt into violence or martyrdom? Were some cultures, due to their political or social forms, more liable to these means of constructing community, and others less liable?

Separation of secular and religious realms: There was a variety of possible relationships between secular and religious power in the ancient world. In some cases, the two overlap so extensively that it is difficult to disentangle them (e.g., Greece and Rome, where priesthood was not a profession as such and citizens who were politically or socially prominent regularly functioned in religious offices); in others, religious functionaries advised secular authorities (as in most periods of ancient Egyptian and Near Eastern history) and in still others, religious authority was sharply separated from secular authority (the Christians and Jews vs. the Romans). Although there are some obvious conclusions to be reached (e.g., the imposition of foreign secular authority can lead to religious rebellion), the implications of the differing models for religious/secular relationships have not yet been fully explored.