
Maijastina Kahlos’s ambitious enterprise is to identify, analyze and interpret the transformations of what is usually called religious tolerance and intolerance in late antiquity, and the limitations to religious freedom which followed the Christianization of the Roman Empire. Since Gibbon, many scholars have tried their hand at this major topic, although few have succeeded in publishing major, synthetic studies. Kahlos (henceforth K.) must be congratulated for having dared, and for having, to a great extent, succeeded in her attempt. If K. prefers to avoid terms such as ‘tolerance’ and ‘intolerance’, it is in order to avoid the anachronism involved in such terms (Locke, who coined the term, first published his *Epistola de tolerantia* in 1689). And yet, the inexistence of a term does not necessarily entail the inexistence of the phenomenon it describes. For all practical purposes, we all know religious intolerance when we see it. K refers there to an old piece of mine. I have presented my views in a more systematic way in a very recent article, and am sorry not to have been able to refer to K’s work.¹

Rather than a social history of religious tolerance and intolerance, she puts the emphasis on rhetoric and the history of religious ideas (hence the true justification of her title). She focuses upon Christians and pagans (or ‘polytheists,’ not necessarily a better option than ‘pagans’), although she does not want to forget either the Jews or the Christian heretics of various kinds. As a matter of fact, Jewish attitudes, or the Jewish roots of Christian attitudes, do not appear very much in the book under review. This is to be regretted, as the tendency among scholars objecting to Christian ‘intolerance’ is to seek for its roots in Jewish monotheism. What interests her particularly is to study the dialectics of the articulation between forbearance and compulsion, from the early period, before 250, to the end of the fifth century, once the new system of values brought by the Christian emperors has been solidly put into place and has become stabilized.

After an introductory chapter, K. offers a review of pagan attitudes to religious ‘otherness’ in the Roman empire (and before it), arguing against the traditional view, since Gibbon, which opposes pagan tolerance to Jewish and Christian, or monotheistic, intolerance. She prefers, rightly, to speak of a cultic diversity rather than of tolerance in the Roman world. In the third century, she points out in a third chapter, fanaticism was not the monopoly of the Christians. Chapters four to seven follow a clearly chronological path, from Constantine to Constantius II, from Julian to Valentinian I, from Gratian to Theodosius I, and after Theodosius I. The eighth and final chapter offers some concluding reflections, about “a world of one alternative.” This

title is remarkable, as Polymnia Athanassiadi has reached a similar conclusion in a recent book, based upon pagan philosophers rather than Christian Fathers.  

This straightforward order has clear advantages. The reader follows the story as it evolved, moving from one author to the other. The book thus provides a highly readable account of the long list of authors (mostly Christian, but also some pagans, such as Libanius and Symmachus in the fourth century – and of course Emperor Julian) who dealt directly with problems of religious tolerance and intolerance. Figures such as Eusebius of Caesarea, Firmicus Maternus, Ambrose, all receive decent treatment. A special case, first of all because of the immense impact his writings would have on Medieval Christianity and culture, is that of Augustine, reasonably well treated by K., considering the need to forego any in-depth monographic study in a synthetic work such as hers. Augustine's case immediately invokes violence. Religious intolerance, or compulsion, is not violence, but the two phenomena are obviously linked, as Brent Shaw’s magisterial book has just showed.

K. sets as her goal to analyze rhetorical patterns, but she does not forget that in ‘real life,' people do not necessarily follow the rules they have themselves established (or according to which they claim to lead their lives). She knows that late antique ‘everyday life’ offered many instances of forbearance, despite an ideology of compulsion. All this is obviously true, and the reader will get a rather accurate picture of the various attitudes towards religious toleration (or the lack thereof) in the Roman Empire, pagan as well as Christian. For this, K. must be commended: she has offered us a very useful book.

And yet, I retain a sense of dissatisfaction, which comes less from what she says than from what she does not say. In other words, the author deals well with the dialectical relationship between the rhetoric of forbearance and that of compulsion, but she does a less convincing job in discussing the dialectical relationship between rhetoric and reality. In other words, and this despite the book’s chronological approach, we do not understand very well how things evolved in the way they did. We do not understand, moreover, why a religion presenting itself as a religion of love, a religion outlawed and persecuted in the first three centuries of its existence, and whose spokesmen had presented such powerful arguments in favor of religious toleration, became so violently opposed to granting it to outsiders and opponents from within, very soon after it became the religion of the Emperor. This nagging problem remains with us.

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4 See my article cited n. 1 above for a number of suggestions.