1

RE-THEORIZING RELIGIOUS CONFLICT

Early Christianity to late antiquity and beyond

Wendy Mayer

(CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)
DOI: 10.4324/9781315387666-2

The OA chapter is funded by: Australian Research Council
1

RE-THEORIZING RELIGIOUS CONFLICT

Early Christianity to late antiquity and beyond

*Wendy Mayer*

Religion, religious conflict, and the neuroscientific turn

In their introductory essay to a volume analyzing contemporary religious conflict from three social science perspectives, Powell and Clarke both catalogue and unwittingly reinforce an assumption that has long underwritten and continues to inform theories about the intersection between religion, (in)tolerance, and conflict, namely that pre-Enlightenment societies were typically intolerant. At the other end of the historical spectrum and until recently the beginning point for this hostility towards religious unorthodoxy has been set at the moment of Christianity’s official adoption (313 CE) on the premise that polytheism is, by contrast, inherently tolerant. By polytheism is meant – with the exception of ancient and early post-Second Temple Judaism – the religions of the ancient Greek and Roman worlds. While the starting point for this so-called rise in intolerance has in recent years been pushed back into the third century, the overwhelmingly dominant view persists that once Christianity became a *religio licita* and gained political power it became coercive, intolerant, and not infrequently violent. The nostalgic view that the classical polytheist world is one of religious tolerance and coexistence, whereas monotheism, which is exclusivist, is responsible for much of the religious violence perpetrated between the rise of Christianity and the end of pre-modern history, is, as Jan Bremmer and other theorists of religion have recently argued, itself an artefact of post-Enlightenment liberalism. This is an ideology which, in response to the protracted post-Reformation religious wars in Europe, conceived of religion as antithetical to the new age of science and reason and so sought to write religion permanently out of society. Henceforth it was restricted to the private domain. This view of religion as in its death throes and as having no future impact on society is a hallmark of secularization theory. Contemporary religious conflicts that engage the state are, in this view, to be attributed to a traditional or pre-modern, irrational society. This is an important point to which we will return, but for the moment let us simply point out that, with some recent significant exceptions, it continues to predicate twenty-first-century
Western governmental responses to religious conflicts, as well as inform the ways in which Western scholars attempt to understand the phenomenon.9

As Fox and Sandler point out, scholars have been scrambling since the events of 9/11 both to explain the role of religion in an upsurge in national and transnational violence10 and to reintroduce religion as a significant social variable into social, political, and international relations theory.11 Research on this perceived new rise in religious intolerance is in some areas starting to align with insights from neuroscientific research that began to emerge in the 1980s and that have steadily been gaining acceptance, to the effect that the mind is embodied, and that affect or emotion has primacy to reasoned thought, particularly in regard to moral judgement.12 If we accept that cognitive and moral systems lie behind the evolution within human society of religion,13 then these findings have profound implications for the viability of secularization theory and a liberal view of the (negligible) social impact of religion. In fact one of the pioneers of such studies has long argued that the age of reason is a chimera that we need to move beyond, if we are to understand and accommodate morality (and thus religion) as a significant factor in human behaviour and society.14 Ironically it is precisely what the age of Enlightenment rejected (the embodied mind) in favour of a body-mind dualism that promoted the priority of reason on the basis of science that science is now asking us to re-accept.

By now, the reader will be wondering what any of this has to do with religious conflict in general and the pursuit of the topic in relation to early Christianity and late antiquity in particular, but again the implications are profound. Firstly, religious tolerance is not an absolute, but in fact itself a moral virtue embraced by secularist liberal ideology.15 It is a social construct of Enlightenment thought. If the foundations of that ideology are now in question, then we must ask whether that virtue’s entailment – that religious intolerance is an evil, in that it damages the health of society – is valid. After all, as Powell and Clarke point out, liberalism itself would argue for a limit to tolerance when the tolerance of another religion is harmful to society.16 Indeed, it is precisely this argument that we see informing recent conclusions concerning the limits of the tolerance of other religions under Roman rule in the period before Constantine.17 The implication of this is that, even when we think that as scholars we are deconstructing dominant assumptions (in this case the inherent intolerance of monotheist and tolerance of polytheist religion), we need to ask ourselves whether, instead of succeeding, we are in fact simply adopting another element of the same paradigm.

Secondly, if a pre-Enlightenment view of the world is how we as human beings in fact behave and act in the world from a moral-religious perspective, then this is something we should intentionally move to embrace rather than back away from. The findings of the neurosciences do not condemn us to a world of superstition and prejudice from which we thought we had escaped,18 but rather help us to accept the affective agency of religion in human society as a biological fact,19 while providing us with tools that help us to explain and understand it. Further, if religion is to be inserted back into and perhaps even foregrounded in
contemporary social-scientific and political theories, then it makes sense that it is to a world that conceived of religion in a way that is aligned with embodied cognition that we should look for answers. This is particularly the case, if, as current neuroscientific studies suggest, consciously suppressing in our own minds a rationalist view of the world that has been cognitively strengthened since birth is likely to prove extremely difficult.\(^\text{20}\) While some answers may lie in taking a fresh look at traditional and/or non-Western societies and cultures,\(^\text{21}\) including those of Africa, a fresh investigation of the role of religion in the pre-Enlightenment world and in the historical period which is thought to have witnessed the (old) “rise of intolerance,” in particular – that is, the centuries immediately before and after the “rise of Christianity” – is likely to prove equally fruitful. This is particularly the case when we consider that in the ancient and late ancient Mediterranean world from the fifth century BCE up to at least the fifth century CE in elite circles a model of individual and societal health that was intimately linked to both morality and the embodied soul/mind held sway,\(^\text{22}\) while across society the excluded middle – that is, the world of the supernatural – and religion were both enmeshed and embedded.\(^\text{23}\) In these respects, whether one examines a philosophic sect, a monotheist, syncretist, hybrid, poly- or heno-theist religion in this period makes little difference. This point is important since, as we will see shortly, theorization of religious conflict in this period has been criticized for its Christianity-centred focus. Further, since social health is a desideratum not just of modern liberal ideology, but lies behind the moral foundational systems that have evolved across societies up to the present day,\(^\text{24}\) we could just as well flip the subtitle of a recent book on the embeddedness of morality in twenty-first-century American politics\(^\text{25}\) and ask: how can we understand twenty-first-century religious conflict without a first- (or second-, third-, or fourth-) century brain? Curiously this is precisely what has been proposed in a 2013 doctoral dissertation in the discipline of critical rhetoric. Appealing to Gorgias and the classical Greek theory of the sophist as social physician, the author, Brett Ingram, argues for the integration of the neurosciences into critical rhetorical theory in order to understand and address issues like the impact of rhetorical violence – a significant component in religious conflict – on the principle that current neuroscience confirms a surprising number of theories held by ancient Graeco-Roman philosophers on the embodied mind.\(^\text{26}\)

**Towards a new theorizing of religious conflict**

Having established that study of religious conflict in an historical period at first sight so distant from the twenty-first century – but, as we can now see, not so distant at all – is not just an academic exercise, but may in fact prove essential to helping us understand and negotiate religious conflict in the contemporary world, the next step is to engage in laying a fresh set of theoretical foundations that incorporate and internalize what, for lack of a better term, we will call the neuroscientific turn.\(^\text{27}\) This is important, if we are to move towards a self-conscious re-examination of religion and religious conflict in these critical(?) centuries.\(^\text{28}\) In order to do this,
however, we must first step back and take stock of some of the theories and presuppositions that dominate current readings of the phenomenon in early Christianity and late antiquity. We then need to address the plethora of definitions that attach to some of the terms used and the lack of clear definition in the case of others. Lastly, we also need to ask ourselves what assumptions lie behind these approaches and to what subconscious ideological or moral systems they are attributable. That is, the more we lay out in the open, the better our chance of assessing what continues to be valid and what does not in a worldview that incorporates the embodied mind, as well as of improving our capacity to be self-conscious and self-critical about how and even why we study religious conflict. The latter is critical, since, as the neurosciences now point out, we ourselves rationalize the world and perform actions on the basis of what Burke would call a particular piety, that is, an individualized, internally coherent, largely subconscious moral system. This is a substantial undertaking and not all of these steps can be completed in one chapter. Even engaging in just the first step – a critique of dominant and current approaches – is sufficient to demonstrate, however, that the neuroscientific turn disrupts our current approaches to religious conflict, while simultaneously pointing towards a number of paths for research that have been neglected.

Current approaches

Polytheism = tolerance | monotheism = intolerance

When we turn to current approaches, we have already raised and largely deconstructed one of the most dominant to date, that of polytheist (i.e., pre-Christian) tolerance and monotheist (i.e., Christian) intolerance. This, as a number of scholars have recently pointed out, is a view that emerges within secularist liberal ideology in reaction to the bloody and protracted intra-Christian religious wars in Europe in the seventeenth century. At its crudest, the logical flow is that the Christian state was responsible for indefensible social harm, so religion (Christianity) must be excised from the political = public sphere. Since this is then enshrined as a doctrine of the separation of Church and state, the entire period during which the two were not separate, that is, the entire period in European history from the seventeenth century back to the conversion of Constantine, comes under suspicion. It thus serves to set the beginning point for Christianity’s harmful impact on society at 313 CE. In this view, a period in which no religion gained political dominance within the cultures that gave birth to Europe becomes a golden age, imbued with the virtue of religious tolerance. In this nostalgic view the Roman imperial cult is conveniently forgotten or its influence on the state not viewed as comparable to that of Christianity. In this crude outline we can see the origins of at least two other lenses through which, to date, the study of religious conflict has been filtered: 1. That the conversion of Constantine constitutes a benchmark in the decline of religious tolerance; and; 2. A narrow focus on the religions of Greece and Rome, on the one hand, and on Christianity, on the other. We need to note
here that recently scholars have been working hard to foreground and overcome these biases. This activity is associated with awareness-raising that concepts like “religion,” “religious violence,” “tolerance,” and “intolerance” are not emic, that is part of the internal thought-world of Graeco-Roman society, until well beyond the fourth century CE. And we have to admit that the concept “religious conflict” is likewise a modern, etic construct. It needs to be noted, however, that regardless of whether we adopt more emic terms like “forbearance” and “compulsion,” as Maijastina Kahlos proposes, we are still in essence addressing the same concepts. As we have already pointed out, the recent turn in scholarship towards an argument that there were limits to polytheist tolerance, matched by corresponding limits to Christian intolerance, while it appears to deconstruct this overarching model, in fact operates from within the same paradigm, where religious tolerance is a (modern, liberal) socially constructed virtue.

**The religious marketplace**

A second dominant model, that of the religious marketplace, is related, and similarly benchmarks the conversion of Constantine and focuses attention on Christianity and the religions of Greece and Rome. In this model, derived from Rational Choice Theory, which is in turn anchored in the economic theory of Adam Smith, Christianity emerges in a pluri-religious urban society where it is in competition for converts. The focus here is on the rise to success of Christianity against the other available religions. Within this model, the character of the relationship between religions in the first three centuries CE is described by the four Cs: coexistence, co-operation, competition, and conflict. The ideas of rivalry, competition, or struggle as important social factors in turn have their basis in evolutionary and Marxist social theory. In scholarship deriving from the discipline of Classics as opposed to Early Christian or Biblical Studies, in terms of the relationship between cults in the Hellenistic and Roman world competition has been viewed as both a social phenomenon and as an engine of religious change. Both sets of ideas have been discussed and critiqued at length by Engels and Van Nuffelen in their introduction to the volume *Religion and Competition in Antiquity*, although it should be noted that they see the marketplace as a problematic metaphor rather than engaging directly with Stark and other rational choice of religion theorists. What they do usefully highlight, for our purposes, is the failure of the negative entailment of this set of ideas, that Christianity signals the end of competition. Of even greater significance is that this set of theories, too, emerges from within secularist liberal ideology that sees reason as a primary agent and religious pluralism as an ideal and that equates religious competition (equivalent to free market capitalism) with religious vitality. Here the assumption of “rational choice” as applied to religion is particularly problematic. Where previous criticism of these models has focused on the validity of the idea of choice, current neuroscientific findings about the primacy of affect over reason when it comes to moral judgement undermine not the idea of choice in regard to religion, but the primacy of
reason in such a choice. These studies suggest, on the contrary, that emotion and intuition most likely play an initial role and that a person then rationalizes his or her choice, if at all, after the fact.

By now it will be clear that modern sociology of religion as a discipline is to a large extent still under the influence of functionalist and secularist post-Enlightenment modes of thought and we must also ask whether a theory of religious competition per se, whether applied to a pluri-religious society, as is assumed to describe Graeco-Roman society prior to the conversion of Constantine, or one in which a single religion dominates, as is assumed to be the case subsequently, should not itself be subjected to critical re-examination. That is, competition as a model may or may not be a valid tool for assessing the role of religion in society in the ancient to late ancient world. If we are to accept or reject it with confidence, however, we need at the very least to expose to critical examination the ideological origins of the model and ask whether, given that religion has no clear definition within society at this period, competition offers an adequate explanation.

A further point is that the ideology that underlies both the (in)tolerance and competition models and their variants is fundamentally Euro- (= Western-) centric, as is the bulk of the scholarship that informs them. This, as we have already noted, creates an unconscious bias towards what are perceived to be the great ancestors of Europe and its Enlightenment – Greece and Rome and their religions – and to the successor majority religion that shaped the history of Europe and its colonies, Christianity. As scholars of Judaism, among others, have rightly pointed out, much scholarship on religion in classical and late antiquity to date retains these biases. So scholars from within the discipline of Classical studies rightly criticise scholars of New Testament, Early Christian and Late Antique studies of examining Graeco-Roman religion through Christian-coloured or monotheist lenses. The same criticism, however, can be levelled at much of the scholarship on Judaism, on religions beyond the borders of the Roman empire and on Manichaeism in this period, where the religions are examined less in their own right than from a predominantly Graeco-Roman-religious as well as Christian perspective.

Another entailment of these models and their underlying ideology, particularly in relation to the question of religious conflict, is a second subconscious bias, this time towards viewing each religion as a monolithic entity. While recent scholarship, with its emphasis on a spectrum of co-existing Judaisms, Islams, or Christianities, is beginning to unpack this bias in relation to monotheistic religions, this conceptualisation of religion needs to be brought into greater dialogue with the view of polytheist cults as being by nature individual and local in their expression. What current neuroscientific research on liberal versus conservative moral systems and on the intersection between affect, reason and behaviour suggests is that the adherents and their beliefs and practices within all religious systems are susceptible to polarization. This language at present appears rarely, if at all, in the literature. The concept of polarization itself suggests that religious conflict should be viewed not as a fixed or end state but as a process, while we need also
to pay attention to the idea that all religious groups, not just monotheisms, are susceptible to sectarian fragmentation. Under what conditions this phenomenon occurs or fails to occur across the full range of religions that existed in the ancient to late ancient world and to what degree it is attributable to the character of the individual religion (as opposed to other factors) is an avenue of research as yet inadequately explored.

Religious conflict = religious violence

This leads us to a third approach that currently dominates the study of both contemporary and early Christian and late ancient religious conflicts. This is an approach that views religious conflict from the sole perspective of one of its (extreme) modes of expression, religious violence. This holds true whether the focus is physical or rhetorical violence. Bremmer in his 2014 article, “Religious Violence between Greeks, Romans, Christian and Jews,” refers to the appearance in the preceding decade of a “tsunami” of studies of the phenomenon in antiquity. While this is somewhat exaggerated for antiquity, it comes closer to the mark when we add in books, articles, and new journals that seek to explain the phenomenon in the twenty-first century. The recent increase in publications on religious fundamentalism and martyrdom both ancient and modern can be included as subsets of this approach. This emphasis in response to not just the events of 9/11, but the constant reporting in the media of fresh examples around the world of suicide bombings, beheadings of apostates, and destruction of cultic sites is natural and has its uses. These we will discuss in a moment. The problem arises when this overwhelming emphasis on an extreme becomes fixed in both public and academic perception as representing the whole, leading to the neglect not just of other potentially significant aspects of religious conflict, but of informed discussion on the question of where religious conflict in all its aspects and manifestations fits into concepts of social harm and social good.

The latter is a huge question that cannot be unpacked here. Instead we will look briefly at the utility of just two of the numerous viewpoints and findings that have emerged from this vast body of research, one from contemporary studies, one from the study of late antiquity. Firstly, as Fox and Sandler point out, the focus on religious violence has opened up debate about the nature of the relationship between politics, ethnicity, race, and religion in national and transnational conflicts. We see a similar discussion emerging in the work of Engels and Van Nuffelen concerning the Graeco-Roman world, where they argue for the intertwining of religion with ethnic and cultural differences, social distinctions, and politics. The work of both Lakoff, in particular, and Haidt, in general, drawing on their own experimental work and that of others in the neurosciences, confirms the existence of an intimate connection at the cognitive level with morality in the case of politics. Secondly, among scholars who study the world of late antiquity the focus on violence has drawn attention to an observable disjunction between violent discourse or speech and violent action. This is still in the process of being
unpacked, but emerges most clearly in the case of the destruction of the cultic buildings and images of one religion (in this case, a variety of Graeco-Roman cults) by another (Christianity). Here a significant discrepancy is being revealed between the reportage of acts of violence in the dominant religion’s rhetoric and the physical evidence.64 Without the benefit of verifiable evidence, a similar discussion is nonetheless opening up regarding the relationship between stories of martyrdom and persecution in the early Christian centuries and their historical reality.65 In this respect, Ingram’s insightful discussion of the impact of violent rhetoric on the brain as physiological trauma opens up an avenue for dialogue between these discussions in late antiquity, research from the neurosciences, and critical rhetoric.66 A significant aspect of religious conflict that has not been well explained by sociological theories to date is the precise nature of the relationship between what a religious leader says, the impact of that speech on a follower’s brain, and that follower’s actions. What Burke’s piety theory, the theories of Bourdieu, and the current neuroscientific research together suggest is that this is in some respects simple and in others quite complex.67

**Religious conflict = identity-formation**

The emphasis on violence and the raising of questions about the role of the rhetoric of violence in relation to it brings us to one final influential perspective from which religious conflict in early Christianity and late antiquity has been addressed, which will be discussed only in brief. This is the analysis of conflict rhetoric through the lens of identity theory, more specifically the role of in-group/out-group bias in constructing identity.68 This theory, adopted from social psychology, has been particularly influential in Late Antique studies, where the language of alterity, deviancy, and discussion of strategies of delegitimization of out-groups – for instance, bestial language applied to Jews, or accusations of child sacrifice against Christians – is common.69 It also lies behind the oppositional labels “heresy/heterodoxy” and “orthodoxy.”70 Here, as in the case, of the first two theories discussed, we again see a marked bias in application towards Christianity,71 this time with some slight justification in that Christianity is a newly emergent religion. The implications extend far beyond the identity-formation of Christianity and its various expressions, however, and there is much work to be done on how the rhetoric and/or praxis of other newly emerging religious groups, such as Rabbinic Judaism, Manichaeanism, and Islam, was received,72 and how the rhetoric that accompanied the refashioning of the identity of existing religious groups spawned, or emerged from within (and thus reinforced), conflict.73 Slight progress has been made in broadening research into the in-group/out-group oppositional categories heresy-orthodoxy, where it is now, if slowly, increasingly being recognized that this particular bias is not specific to Christianity in particular, nor monotheisms in general.74 There is also an emerging discussion about the gap between heresy-orthodoxy discourse, which foregrounds belief, and orthopraxy, which is now thought in regard to personal religious identity in the ancient to
late ancient world to have had priority. This has potential implications for the current direction in sociology-of-religion research, with its emphasis on religious fundamentalism.

Where identity research is beginning to produce particularly valuable insights concerns an emerging recognition of the gap between rhetoric that had previously been read as indicative of historical inter-group conflict and the reality that this is an example of in-group/out-group bias where the out-group label is used to refer to a deviant other inside the same religion. That is, what is rhetorically constructed as inter-group religious conflict, such as “pagan-Christian” or “Christian-Jewish,” is now being revealed as a product of intra- or inner-group conflict in which the issue of clarifying group identity in a time of uncertainty is in the foreground. An example is the article by Douglas Boin, in which he deconstructs the previously influential oppositional categories “pagan” and “Christian.” This finding opens up our reading of current “Islamic-Christian” or “Islamic-Jewish” religious conflicts.

Of equal interest are recent studies which show how the application of in-group/out-group strategies in intra-group conflict can spread conflict beyond the group to the religion that is not the original target of the conflict, but is employed as the scapegoated other. Abel Mordechai Bibliowicz’s recent book arguing that anti-Semitism is a by-product (an “unintended” consequence) of early intra-Christian conflict and identity-formation is an important example. One final avenue of interest is recent discussion of the gap between increased activity directed towards memory construction inside a religious group – this is not explicitly polemical, but might be thought to suggest a response to external pressures – and historical reality, which indicates minimal real local or regional inter-religious conflict. This research is emerging in particular from exploration of the impact on local Christianities of the Arab conquest and the rise of a competing, dominant religion, Islam. Such studies bring into ever-increasing question assumptions about the direct link between conflict rhetoric and conflict reality that have long held sway. Here again, the insights emerging from much of this research could be deepened by being brought more explicitly into dialogue with experimental psychology and neuroscientific research. As Mar Marcos argues, maybe approaches that saw Christian narratives of violence towards other religions as reflecting real violence prove problematic not because there is no direct link between such narratives and actual violence, but because they placed the cart before the horse. Is it possible, she asks, that the narratives of violence that arose as a part of boundary demarcation are causative? Instead of commemorating historical reality, did they subtly encourage acts of violence that occurred after the fact? The full mapping out of the agency of identity-formation in religious conflict, on the one hand, and of religious conflict in identity-formation, on the other, remains as yet some distance away.

Conclusion

If we are not at the beginning of a re-theorization of religious conflict, then the neurosciences are demonstrating compellingly that we should be. In showing that
the primacy of reason in moral judgement is a myth, they disrupt ways of looking at the phenomenon that have dominated research, public perception, and governmental responses. At the very least, their findings call on us to attribute greater agency to emotion in religious belief, discourse, and action, than has previously been the case. Their precise implication for a revised theory of religious conflict, on the other hand, has yet to be unfolded. We argued that the first step is to engage in laying a fresh set of theoretical foundations that incorporate and internalize what, for lack of a better term, we called the neuroscientific turn. In order to do that, we argued, we must first critically examine the theories that currently undergird how we describe, frame, and respond to religious conflict. This chapter has been a first step in that direction. As we suggested, even engaging in just the very beginnings of this first step – a critique of dominant and current approaches – has been sufficient to demonstrate that the neuroscientific turn disrupts our current approaches to religious conflict, while simultaneously pointing towards a number of paths for research that have been neglected or insufficiently explained. Further, this tentative step has shown how important it is for us as scholars to be more self-reflective and self-critical of our inherent Burkean pieties. One of the felicitous side-effects of this endeavour is that as scholars of religion in antiquity, late antiquity or African studies we are no longer required to find justifications for our research. On the contrary, if we are to understand why religious conflict occurs today in what is increasingly being acknowledged as the failure of the Age of Reason in what is biologically an embodied-mind world, then study of the phenomenon in the ancient to late ancient world, alongside studies of the phenomenon in historical and contemporary Africa – societies in which the embodied mind is accepted and in which religion is entwined with private and public life at every level – can now play an important, perhaps even central, role.

Notes

1 In addition to her role as Associate Dean of Research, Australian Lutheran College, University of Divinity, Wendy Mayer is also a Research Fellow in the Department of Biblical and Ancient Studies, University of South Africa. This chapter is dedicated to Luke Lavan, who first suggested the connection between current Western shock at religious conflict and European secularist ideology as a missing link in my thought. I am also deeply indebted to Jan Bremmer, who offered insightful comments on an earlier draft and pointed me towards additional supporting literature, and to Scott Bartchy, for his review and long discussion with me about the ideas presented in this article.

2 Russell Powell and Steve Clarke, “Religion, Tolerance, and Intolerance: Views from Across the Disciplines,” in Religion, Intolerance, and Conflict: A Scientific and Conceptual Investigation, ed. S. Clarke, R. Powell, and J. Savulescu (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 7–10. It should be noted that the authors deconstruct this assumption to some extent for the period prior to the Enlightenment, but that their interest in ideologies that have influenced modern to postmodern conceptions lead them rather to presume that intolerance is normative across history and societies and resistant to change.

3 For critiques of this premise, see Joachim Losehand, “‘The Religious Harmony in the Ancient World’: Vom Mythos religiöser Toleranz in der Antike,” Göttinger Forum


6 In situating the roots of religious violence in monotheism, the work of the Egyptologist Jan Assmann has been particularly influential. See, e.g., J. Assmann, Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); id., Die Mosaische Unterscheidung oder der Preis des Monotheismus (München: Hanser Akzent, 2003); id., Monotheismus und die Sprache der Gewalt (Wien: Picus Verlag, 2006); and most recently the essay, “Monotheismus und Gewalt,” January 29, 2013, www.perlentaucher.de/essay/monotheismus-und-gewalt.html; accessed March 26, 2017; and, for a sample of critiques of his views, Losehand, “Religious Harmony,” 111–12; Jan Bremmer, “Religious Violence and Its Roots: A View from Antiquity,” Asdiwal: Revue genevoise d’anthropologie et d’histoire des religions 6 (2011): 71–9; and René Bloch, “Polytheismus und Monotheismus in der paganen Antike: Zu Jan Assmanns Monotheismus-Kritik,” in Fremdbilder-Selbstbilder: Imaginationen des Judentums von der Antike bis in die Neuzeit, ed. R. Bloch et al. (Basel: Verlag Schwabe, 2010), 5–24. It is of interest that approaches from the perspective of evolutionary biology can arrive at the same conclusion. See, e.g., John Teighan, In the Name of God: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Ethics and Violence (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), who, although he sees the moral psychology that predisposes us towards religion as responsible for violence, not religion per se, nonetheless views the universalist/exclusivist tendencies within Christianity’s moral code as problematic. Regardless of whether he does so because the New Atheists,
among others, single out the three great monotheist religions as causative, his focus on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam serves unintentionally to underwrite this position.


11 Fox and Sandler, “The Question of Religion,” 5–6, 10; and see the sample list of resulting publications cited by Mayer, “Religious Conflict,” 1 n. 1. Fox and Sandler, “The Question of Religion,” 6, document the beginnings of a re introduction of religion as an important factor into political science theory in the 1980s, but point out that this was never mainstream. The quest for explanation has had a concurrent impact on historical research. See Bremmer, “Religious Violence,” 8 n. 1, for a list of recent books on religious violence in antiquity.


13 This is the view of Moral Foundations Theory, which draws in turn on the theory of Emile Durkheim (The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, 1912) regarding the social-binding function of morality (religion). See J. Graham et al., “Moral Foundations Theory: The Pragmatic Validity of Moral Pluralism,” Advances in Experimental
RE-THEORIZING RELIGIOUS CONFLICT

Social Psychology 47 (2013): 55–130. Teehan, In the Name of God, applies this specifically to the topic of religious violence.


17 Engels and Van Nuffelen, “Religion and Competition,” 13–14, who argue that the limit was reached “when a new religious form seemed to endanger the social and political cohesion of the city” or the later Roman state; and Kahlos, Forbearance and Compulsion, 9–27. Bremmer, “Religious Violence,” 14–18, is less concerned with arguing for tolerance within limits prior to the rise of Christianity than deconstructing the myth of polytheistic tolerance.


19 See Ryan McKay and Harvey Whitehouse, “Religion and Morality,” Psychological Bulletin 141.2 (2015): 447–73, who argue, however, that the concepts “morality” and “religion” themselves need to be deconstructed and carefully defined, if the relationship between biology and culture is to be determined without bias.

20 The embodied and cognitive intransigence of particular moral/value systems was first formulated by the rhetorician Kenneth Burke in Permanence and Change (1935) on the basis of his exposure to research on drug addiction. For a useful analysis of his theory of piety see Jordynn Jack, “‘The Piety of Degradation’: Kenneth Burke, the Bureau of Social Hygiene, and Permanence and Change,” The Quarterly Journal of Speech 90.4 (2004): 446–68. His theory of piety has since been validated and formalised by recent neuroscientific research as set out by Ingram, “Critical Rhetoric in the Age of Neuroscience,” 55–100. I am deeply indebted to my colleague in Biblical Studies at Unisa, Johannes Vorster, for alerting me to the work of Burke on piety in the first instance. Interestingly, this theory neatly describes the anti-religious “religious” fervour of the New Atheists on the basis of their affective “addiction” to secularist rational liberal ideology.
This was the approach of Haidt, leading to insights concerning three additional foundational moral systems. See his reflection on the influence of his postdoctoral research in India in the blog “What Makes People Vote Republican?” September 8, 2008, http://edge.org/conversation/what-makes-vote-republican, accessed March 26, 2017. Durkheim himself derived many of his theories about religion and society from his study of traditional societies, especially Australian aborigines.

On the Greek conception of the body politic as susceptible to both disease and health, see G.E.R. Lloyd, In the Grip of Disease: Studies in the Greek Imagination (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, repr. 2009), 1–13. For an outline and analysis of the medico-philosophical-moral therapeutic approach in the classical to early imperial periods, see Christopher Gill, “Philosophical Therapy as Preventive Psychological Medicine,” in Mental Disorders in the Classical World, ed. W.V. Harris (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 339–62. The literature, both primary and secondary, on the therapy of the emotions in the ancient Graeco-Roman world is substantial.


On the basis of his experimental research, Haidt argues in “Moral Psychology” that, regardless of where one sits on the conservative-liberal spectrum, the foundational harm/care system is a guiding principle, whereas all of the foundational systems are concerned with regulating selfishness for the benefit of the social group.

Lakoff, The Political Mind, subtitled in its original printing: “Why You Can’t Understand 21st-Century Politics with an 18th-Century Brain.”

Ingram, “Critical Rhetoric in the Age of Neuroscience,” esp. 14, 49–50. The primacy of affect/emotion over reason, one of the more significant recent neuroscientific findings, points us directly back to the Hellenistic emphasis on therapy of the affects/emotions, with significant implications for the connection between hate-filled or emotive speech and its (differentiated) impacts on the conscious mind and subconscious brain of the listener.

This is to distinguish it from the “cognitive turn,” a label employed in scholarly literature of the 1980s and ’90s to reference the application of findings and theories from psychology.

The question mark attached to “critical” is deliberate, in that the notion of a “rise of intolerance,” whether located in the third or fourth century CE, and the link drawn to the rise to political dominance of monotheism (Christianity) – language now being recycled in relation to the twenty-first century and the rise to political dominance of another monotheist religion, Islam – are both concepts that require careful critical examination.

This is the case not just with the terms “religion,” “tolerance,” “intolerance,” “religious conflict,” “violence,” but also with “social harm,” “social health,” and “virtue.”

What cognitive theorists appear to agree on, regardless of the particular aspect of cognition on which their research focuses, is that the general systems they describe are comprised of different components from within a large set of variables at the level of the individual brain. In terms of morality, two conflicting variables in the same subset, however, cannot be held by the same individual brain at the same time. On neural binding, biconceptualism and moral contradiction see Lakoff, The Political Mind, 69–72.

See nn. 3 and 7–8 above. Losehand, “Religious Harmony,” 104–9, provides a detailed and helpful critique of the myths associated with this ideology, tracing its development through Hume, Locke and Gibbon, among others. Canella, “Tolleranza e intolleranza,” 249–52, independently traces a similar trajectory.

Although they debate precisely how the conversion of Constantine was a benchmark and do not explicitly focus on issues of (in)tolerance, the work of senior scholars of late antiquity is indicative in this regard. See, e.g., Peter Brown, The Rise of Western

33 E.g., the works of Losehand, Canella, Bremmer, Kahlos, Engels, and Van Nuffelen cited (nn. 3 and 5 above). Similarly, Mar Marcos in her article, “‘He Forced with Gentleness’: Emperor Julian’s Attitude to Religious Coercion,” Antiquité Tardive 17 (2009): 191–204, carefully unpacks the contemporary language and avoids terms like “tolerance” or “intolerance” in favour of “coercion.”


35 Kahlos, Forbearance and Compulsion, 2, 6–8.

36 We see this especially in the Critical Theory of Religion School, where religion is determinately negated and secularized in order to locate “religion” positively within a humane society. Here the proponents are responding not to the wars of the Counter-Reformation, but to the horrors of Auschwitz. See Rudolf Siebert, Manifesto of the Critical Theory of Society and Religion, 3 vols (Leiden: Brill, 2010).


38 This model has been influential among New Testament scholars, on which see Mayer, “Religious Conflict,” 8–10, the first of the Cs sometimes being replaced by scholars of Graeco-Roman religion with “cohabitation.” The model of the four Cs is set out by Richard Ascough in “Religious Coexistence, Co-Operation, Competition, and Conflict in Sardis and Smyrna,” in Religious Rivalries and the Struggle for Success in Sardis and Smyrna, ed. Richard S. Ascough (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005), 245–52. For an example of the “cohabitation” paradigm, see the articles in Beyond Conflicts: Cultural and Religious Cohabitations in Alexandria and Egypt Between the 1st and the 6th Century CE, ed. Luca Arcari (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017).


45 See Haidt, “The Emotional Dog”; Ingram, “Critical Rhetoric in the Age of Neuroscience,” 59–66; Clarke, Justification of Religious Violence, 75–7. Ibid., 79–80, however, is reluctant to demote the role of reason and questions the validity of Haidt’s findings as a- or cross-cultural.

46 On this point, see esp. the argument of Brent Nongbri, Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).

47 Although it should be noted that sociologists of religion trace a divergent path between the twentieth-century view of religion and society that developed in the European context and in North America (Turner, “Sociology of Religion,” 291–5). Rational Choice Theory, for instance, emerges from the American, Critical Theory from the European context. This explains to some degree the opposition of Lundskow, a proponent of Critical Theory, to the thesis of Stark.

48 So Steven Fine in his review of Palestine in Late Antiquity (2008), Review of Biblical Literature, published online October 17, 2009, www.bookreviews.org, criticizes its author, Hagith Sivan, for viewing rabbinic sources through “Christianity-colored glasses.” A similar observation is made by Adiel Schremer, Brothers Estranged: Heresy, Christianity, and Jewish Identity in Late Antiquity (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 5, who argues that “the assumption that the destruction of the Second Temple marks a rupture in Jewish history subscribes, in a deep sense, to a Christian theological claim.”


50 Here use of the traditional label “oriental” in opposition to Graeco-Roman religions contains its own set of assumptions and biases. For an attempt to re-theorize the approach to “oriental” religions within the Roman Empire, see the articles in Panthée: Religious Transformations in the Graeco-Roman Empire, ed. Corinne Bonnet and Laurent Bricault (Leiden: Brill, 2013), esp. the introduction, 1–14, where the editors provide a useful discussion of the development of the label and the approach to the religions classified as “oriental” under the influence of Francois Cumont.


52 E.g., Engels and Van Nuffelen, “Religion and Competition,” 16–18, although, as they proceed to argue in the pages that follow, there was considerable variation in the spread and type of individual cults over time between classical Greece and imperial Rome. See also the recent work of Jörg Rüpke on individual as opposed to public religion


58 See, e.g., Religiöser Fundamentalismus in der römischen Kaiserzeit, ed. Pedro Barceló (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2010), although the editor and contributors have been criticized for misinterpreting fanaticism and zealotry as fundamentalism; Religious Fundamentalism and Political Extremism, ed. Leonard Weinburg and Ami Pedahzur (London: Frank Cass, 2004); Candida R. Moss, Ancient Christian Martyrdom: Diverse Practices, Theologies, and Traditions (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012); ead., The Other Christs: Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom

59 Charles Kurzman, *The Missing Martyrs: Why There Are So Few Muslim Terrorists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), for instance, argues that contemporary Muslim martyrs are in fact the exception rather than the rule. Candida Moss, *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2013), makes a similar case for the first centuries of Christianity. On this phenomenon in scholarship, Jan Bremmer remarks: “Somewhat simplifying we can say that the less sympathetic a historian is to Christianity, the lower the number of martyrs will be” (Bremmer, *Rise of Christianity*, 20). His observations (Ibid., 20–3) on the ideological drive behind analyses resulting in figures towards either end of the scale likely apply equally to scholarly analysis of the practice in contemporary Islam.

60 See Powell and Clarke, “Religion, Tolerance, and Intolerance,” 23–4, who raise the possibility that for some social groups “intolerance in its various manifestations, from subtle discrimination and avoidance to outright aggression and homicide, may have been adaptive,” although they hastily claim that, even if this is an evolutionary reality, it is by no means ethically defensible. Unpalatable as it seems to be to Western sensibilities, this is nonetheless a question that needs to be tackled unprejudicially.


63 See the works cited in n. 53 above.

The literature on this topic is growing, largely in response to and in discussion with the work of Candida Moss (see n. 58), culminating in her controversial book *The Myth of Persecution*.


For a summation of both Burke and Bourdieu on the intransigence of piety/habitus, see Jack, “The Piety of Degradation,” 451–3. What Burke and Bourdieu try to capture in their theories are the mechanisms described by recent studies in neuroplasticity and social and cognitive psychology in their description of how cognitive framing and metaphors function, the process of the strengthening of neural pathways by both mental and physical repetition, the priority of intuitive/subconscious affect/emotion over conscious reason, and the resistance of the resulting subconscious embodied neural pathways to change, particularly when a speaker attempts to bring persuasion about via logical discourse or reasoned argument. Ingram, “Critical Rhetoric in the Age of Neuroscience,” 55 onwards, provides a careful and detailed account of the meeting points between the theories of Burke, Bourdieu, De Certeau, and Foucault and the findings of neuroscience, with special attention to the mechanisms engaged in resistance to persuasion, in persuasion by emotional rhetoric, and the short- and long-term effects on the brain of rhetorical violence.

For a useful outline and discussion of this theory, see Powell and Clarke, “Religion, Tolerance, and Intolerance,” 19–22. Teehan, *In the Name of God*, 1–42, argues that this is intimately connected to moral psychology.


There is a strong link between the theory that “orthodoxy” or purity discourse is a unique product of monotheism and the thesis that monotheism = intolerance. Again, the work of Assmann, although much criticized, has been influential in this respect. For an entry to the substantial literature on both sides of this debate, see n. 6 above.


A recent example in this respect is the article by David Engels, “Historising Religion Between Spiritual Continuity and Friendly Takeover: Salvation History and Religious


75 Bremmer, “Religious Violence.”


81 Brett Ingram’s phrase “the age of neuroscience,” with its suggestion that human society is now moving into the next age beyond that of reason, has both its advantages and disadvantages. An inherent danger is the evocation of social evolution theory or Social Darwinism, which may be precisely what the findings of the neurosciences speak against.

**Bibliography**


