

BOOK REVIEW

Sacred Violence: African Christians and Sectarian Hatred in the Age of Augustine. By Brent D. SHAW. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Pp. ix + 910. Hardcover, £100.00/\$165.00, ISBN 978-0-521-19605-5; paperback, £40.00/\$65.00, ISBN 978-0-521-12725-7.

Good history writing brings events of the past to the attention of the present, and whilst *Sacred Violence* is concerned with the dense particularities of the Christian sectarian conflicts of the long fourth century in North Africa, one cannot help being aware of distressing concerns of the present—suicide bombers achieving the pinnacle of self-sought martyrdom, fighters for political or religious freedom branded as terrorists, violent gangs of mobsters representing themselves as defenders of their religious faith, crowds of legitimate protesters rhetorically turned into “al-Qa’ida” stooges or operatives, local social and political conflicts elevated into holy wars, the unholy violence of sectarian rhetoric between branches of the same religion, and so forth.

Throughout the dense documentation of the period from the second half of the fourth century to the first two decades of the fifth, Shaw shows a sharp eye for slippery propaganda masquerading as historical fact, for the rhetoric of innuendo, for the insidiously misleading use of generalizations, for the manipulation of (selective) historical memory, for acts of downright creative mendacity. Gangs of itinerant seasonal laborers and harvesters (“Circumcellions”) become an intimidating rural insurgency, threatening the general public order—and, with the aid of rhetorical spin, are irretrievably linked by the Catholic faction with their opponents (branded as “Donatists”)—to be distinguished, of course, from the vigorous groups of loyal defenders of Catholic persons and property. And this is all painted against a detailed background of the endemic social (and sometimes ritualized) violence of life throughout the North African towns and villages, as well as the specific legacy of the aftermath of the Great Persecution along with the concept of the inheritance of the satanic pollution of Betrayal incurred during those events. Cyprian has left his ineradicable mark in the thinking of these churches as constituting rather a community of saints than a congregation of sinners, resulting in the spiritual inefficacy of unworthy ministers, heirs of that satanic pollution.

Shaw demonstrates in detail not only actual violence but also the aggressive mass-mobilization of followers through hostile rhetoric, popular songs, ritual chanting and holy slogans. And not only Christian against Christian but Christian mobsters and rioters stirred against pagan sanctuaries, shrines and statues, Christian polemic against proud Jews, with their great betrayer Judas, themes with which Catholics manage rhetorically to entangle the Donatists, eventually to be maneuvered from the category of schism to that of heretic and thence caught up later in the criminalization of heretics, classed as agents of the devil. Shaw is particularly good on the recruitment of clergy and the intense competition in the election of bishops, the (extraordinary) number and (generally poor) quality of those bishops, and the rivalries within the clerical *cursus honorum*, the poaching of candidates from rival bishoprics, and all the associated rancor, squabbles and verbal violence. Against this competitive background there is also illuminatingly depicted the pervasive legal culture, the litigious relations between clergy and state officials, largely local but also provincial and sometimes imperial, culminating in the great Conference of 411 with all its maneuverings and legal chicanery.

And finally we are taken step by step, as Augustine and his peers, in their attempt to deny that their opponents' altruistic surrender of their lives for their cause could be construed as attaining the high ground of martyrdom, move away from the classical concept of the *nobile letum* to the far-reaching conclusion that the taking of one's own life is the ultimate evil, the unforgivable sin of suicide.

Reading these 806 pages (and 8 appendices) is an intellectual delight, engagingly written throughout in clear and supple prose, handsomely presented, richly and painstakingly documented (with original texts helpfully provided in footnotes). A mammoth labor and a truly remarkable scholarly achievement.

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