RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS

J. HAHN: *Gewalt und religiöser Konflikt. Studien zu den Auseinandersetzungen zwischen Christen, Heiden und Juden im Osten des Römischen Reiches (von Konstantin bis Theodosius II.)*. (*Klio* Beihefte, Neue Folge, 8.) Pp. 348. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2004. Cased, €69.80. ISBN: 3-05-003760-1.

The starting point of this book is its author's conviction that if we want to understand the eruption of violence in situations of religious competition in late antiquity, it is necessary to examine in detail the whole social situation in the localities where the violence occurred. In most cases, unfortunately, we do not have sufficient evidence for such an investigation in depth. But H.'s study is concerned with four localities where the documentation not only of the violence but also of its social background is exceptionally full. These are Alexandria, Antioch, Gaza, and last, but not least, Panopolis, where the conflict involved both the city and its violent neighbour, the formidable Shenute, abbot of the monastery of Atripe. H. takes each of these places in turn, describes the growth of the Christian community, assesses the strength of 'Hellenism' as expressed both in surviving pagan cult and in the vigour of the traditional education, and examines the strains and tensions running through the local society. He then proceeds to discuss the occasional (in no case continuous) outbursts of violence in the light of the social problems. There is a lot of material, far more than can be discussed in a review. It must suffice to confirm that H.'s analyses of the various violent episodes are penetrating, and generally convincing. The most valuable part of the book is the section dealing with events at Panopolis, which are the least well known.

Throughout the book H. has a tendency to deconstruct religious violence as such, and to argue that conflicts which our sources represent as religious in reality involved issues that were essentially secular (p. 272: 'Konfrontationen religioser Gruppen . . . als Austragungsfeld und Ventil vielschichtiger Spannungen in der Lokalgesellschaft'). The reviewer is not convinced that this approach is appropriate to late antiquity. It is true that all human motivation is complex, and that in both the past and the present religion has served to provide a cover for a very wide range of demands and grievances, which have more to do with secular conflict and individual ambition than with the worship of God. But it is also true that religion, and particularly monotheistic religion, has proved an extremely powerful factor promoting social change. This was strikingly so in late antiquity after Christianity, with its claim to be the only genuine and legitimate religion, and its insistence on enforcing correct belief, had become the religion of the Roman emperor. This development had a very wide range of consequences, many of them desirable from our point of view, but the reviewer finds it difficult to believe that these consequences did not also include a sharpening of religious conflict, together with increased readiness to use violence in the service of religion. The religion of Theophilus of Alexandria, of Porphyry of Gaza, and of Shenute of Atripe was not an epiphenomenon.

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