The Debate on Religious Coercion in Ancient Christianity*

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I. Introduction: the disputed value of religious coercion

In 408, Vincentius, the bishop of the Rogatists in the city of Cartenna (Mauretania, North Africa)[1], wrote to Augustine of Hippo (354-430) to reproach him because Catholics were resorting to imperial authority to persecute other Christians[2]. Vincentius argued that it was not licit to use coercion in religious matters and complained about the confiscation of property that imperial legislation had prescribed against heretics, adducing that it was not right to take another person's ownership because of their faith. Augustine replied with a long letter (Ep. 93) in which he justifies the use of force *(coertio)* and terror *(terror, timor)* to correct those who deviate in religious matters. Augustine brings forward a large number of examples of "divine violence" in the Old and New Testament that would legitimize the use or coercion. The first of these is the parable of the Great Feast in Luke 14.15-24. When they were about to start a banquet, the master of the house told his servant to call the guests, but one after another they all made excuses not to come. The master became angry and told his servant to go out into the streets and bring in the poor and the maimed. However, there was still some room. The master then ordered him to go out into the highways and hedges, and compel (*anankazō*) them to come in. Augustine cites Verse 23 in Latin (*quoscumque inveneritis cogite intrare*, "whomever you shall find, compel them to enter")[3] and

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[1] The Rogatists were a sect that had separated from the Donatists by the middle of the fourth century. They took their name from bishop Rogatius of Cartenna.

[2] The letter has not been preserved, but its contents can be deduced from Augustine's reply in letter XCIII.

[3] Aug. *Ep*. XCIII 2, 5.

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uses the verb *cogite,* rather than the more common *compelle,* which has a gentler, more allegorical meaning of "to push".

The first example of forced conversions that Augustine adduces is that of Paul of Tarsus, when he was known as Saul, who was forced *(compulsus)* to know the truth through an act of "great" divine violence (*magna violentia Christi*). The conversion of Saul is described in Acts 9. When he was a persecutor of Christians, on the road to Damascus Saul suddenly fell to earth from his horse and heard Jesus's voice saying "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Saul then lost his sight and was led by the hand to Damascus where a disciple of Christ's put his hands on him. Scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he then began to see and to preach. There are many components of physical coercion in Saul's conversion and the expression *magna violentia Christi* that summarises them is paradoxical as Christ normally appears in Christian exegesis as the bringer of peace and not of violence. Many other biblical examples legitimize coercion for Augustine. Sara, Abraham's wife, was cruel to her maid Hagar with a mother's love; Moses tormented his people; Elijah persecuted false prophets, Christ himself flagellated the Jews... Now that the Roman Empire has pious laws to persecute the unfaithful, Augustine reasons, why not resort to the force of the laws? There is just and unjust persecution. When one persecutes in order to correct, as in the case of Catholics with the Donatists, persecution is just. God punishes because He loves. With *paterna diligentia* ("paternal care"), God rebukes and terrifies men for their salvation.

Apart from Biblical authority, more practical reasons lead Augustine to defend the licitness and advantages of coercion[4]. He confesses that in the past he had not been in favour of using force and, on the contrary, he had believed in only using words, discussion and reasoning (*verbo esse agendum, disputatione pugnandum, ratione vincendum*)[5]. There are numerous examples in his vast works showing that for years Augustine advocated dialogue. He tirelessly took part in public meetings with Donatists, Pelagians and Manichaeans to discuss

[4] Augustine's attitude to religious coercion, which changed from a position where he defended dialogue to one in which he justified force as a useful and licit instrument of conversion, has been the subject of numerous studies, which agree on stressing the absence in Augustine of a coherent doctrine on this matter. See Joly 1955; Brown 1963; Brown 1964; Markus 1970, pp. 133-153; Bowlin 1997; Chadwick 2009, pp. 111-115; Gaumer – Dupont 2009.

[5] Aug. *Ep*. XCIII 5, 17.

their differences in doctrine or in their conception of the Church. A large volume of letters and treatises have been preserved in which Augustine debates theological matters with "heretics", as well as with cultivated pagans. However, civilized discussion was not incompatible with the use of coercive measures. In Augustine's time, it was normal practice for the different Christian groups to seek support from the emperors, and in fact the intervention of the imperial court in ecclesiastic polices and religious legislation in Late Antiquity most of the time was a response to those petitions. Appealing to the emperor was so common in Augustine's time that in the letter to Vincentius he states that Rogatists oppose to coercive measures not because they consider them illicit but because, as it was a very small sect, it was not influential enough to obtain imperial support. In the same letter, he argues that the Donatists were the first to use these practices, by seeking first Constantine's and then Julian's intervention, and that all, both Catholics and Donatists agreed on praising imperial legislation against pagan sacrifices, which were then punished with the death penalty. The Rogatists, Augustine concludes, ask for toleration because they are in a weak position, otherwise they would reason and act as he himself did.

Augustine confesses that what made him change his mind about the use of coercion it was the ineffectiveness of dialogue and the proven efficacy of laws. Many Donatists had converted out of fear of punishment and expressed their pleasure and gratefulness for having been freed from the errors of their old ways. Fear had made them reflect, and made them docile. The various imperial edicts issued in year 405 in favour of the "true and single Catholic faith"[6] had been successful. Donatists have to understand that Catholics persecuted them because they loved them. They were sick and the Catholics wanted to heal them: medicine is often unpleasant. Paradoxically, it was philanthropy, the desire of saving them all,that made Christians intolerant.

II. The debate on religious freedom in Ancient Christianity

Augustine's Letter 93 is an exceptional document to know late antique religious debate. Few authors in Antiquity reflected in theoretical terms on the idea of religious freedom and on the advantages, or

[6] Preserved in the *Cod. Theod.* XVI 5, 37 (a. 400?); XVI 5, 38; XVI 6, 5; XVI 11, 2.

disadvantages of the use of coercion in the religious sphere. In contrast, we have a great deal of information about religious violence, which increased in Late Antiquity during the conflict between pagans and Christians. There are equally many narratives about the persecution of Christians during the first centuries of the Empire, and then, after Constantine's conversion in 312, we know much about imperial anti-pagan policy, the destruction of temples by Christians, and the persecution of heretics within the Church. I will not deal here with violence and intolerance in Late Antiquity that have been much studied over the last decades[7], but rather I will concentrate on a less explored topic, that is the theoretical reflection on religious freedom and the use of coercion as an instrument of conversion[8].

As far as I know, the first reflection on religious freedom occurred in the context of the persecutions against Christians and is found in Tertullian (c. 160-c. 225)[9]. In an open letter to Scapula, proconsul (governor) of Africa in 212 and a persecutor of Christians, Tertullian laments the injustice of persecution and writes:

> "However, it is a fundamental human right, a privilege of nature, that every man should worship according to his own convictions: one man's religion neither harms nor helps another man. It is assuredly no part of religion to compel religion -to which free-will and not force should lead us-, the sacrificial victims even being required of a willing mind. You will render no real service to your gods by compelling us to sacrifice. For they can have no desire of offerings from the unwilling, unless they are animated by a spirit of contention, which is a thing altogether undivine"[10].

Tertullian had expressed the same argument in an earlier treatise, the *Apology for the Christians,* addressed formally to the magistrates of the Roman Empire responsible for judging Christians:

[7] Religious violence in Late Antiquity has become a privileged topic in recent historiography. See, among others, Gaddis 2005; Drake 2006; Bravo – González Salinero 2007; Marcos 2008; Shaw 2011.

[8] I have developed more extensively this topic in several articles: see Marcos 2007; Marcos 2009; Marcos 2012.

[9] On the idea of religious freedom in Tertullian, see Garnsey 1984, pp. 14-15; Stroumsa 1998; Kahlos 2009, pp. 19-25; Marcos 2012, pp. 49-52.

[10] *Ad Scap.* 2, 2 (trans. S. Thelwall).

> "But as it was easily seen to be unjust to compel freemen against their will to offer sacrifice (for even in other acts of religious service a willing mind is required), it should be counted quite absurd for one man to compel another to do honour to the gods, when he ought ever voluntarily, and in the sense of his own need, to seek their favour, lest in the liberty which is his right he should be ready to say, «I want none of Jupiter's favours; pray who art thou? Let Janus meet me with angry looks, with whichever of his faces he likes; what have you to do with me?». You have been led, no doubt, by these same evil spirits to compel us to offer sacrifice for the well-being of the emperor; and you are under a necessity of using force, just as we are under an obligation to face the dangers of it"[11].

Although different religious traditions co-existed in ancient Mediterranean, as far as we know no explicit theoretical principle on religious liberty had been formulated before the persecutions of the Christians brought the matter up for discussion. It was naturally assumed that each nation (*ethnos*, *natio*) or each *polis* had its own religious traditions, which were accepted as such, while the co-existence of different beliefs and cults was taken as granted. We do not know what Tertullian's sources were in his arguments in favour of religious freedom and the inefficacy of coercion, and in the use of the expression *libertas religionis*. *Libertas* in the ancient world was a political idea, closely tied to the concept of citizenship. In Rome, *libertas* was conceived as "an acquired civic right, not a natural right of man"[12]. But the Roman state tended not to interfere in an individual's religious life, above all in its private dimension, and the notion of freedom of conscience was not totally unknown in Antiquity. We do not know much about this, but the concept of *pax deorum* ('the benevolence of gods') meant that the suppression of a cult and therefore impeding individuals praying to the god of their choice was a delicate matter for the state[13]. The episode of the Bacchanalia in 186 BC is proof of this[14]. Although worshipping Bacchus was forbidden in Italy, the senate, afraid of harming the right of a deity to be worshipped (*divini iuris aliquid immixtum violemus*), determined that, if anyone thought they needed to worship the deity (*si*

[11] *Apology* XXVIII, 1-2 (trans. S. Thelwall)
[12] Wirszubski 1950, p. 3.
[13] On the importance of the concept of *pax deorum* to explain both religious freedom and intolerance in Rome, see Sordi 1991, pp. 4-8.
[14] Liv. XXXIX 8-19.

quis tale sacrum solemne et neccesarium duceret), they would be allowed to do so under certain conditions. Although the senate might have been acting cynically in this case, as the general process aimed to make it impossible for any kind of Bacchanalian cult to continue, under the pretence of allowing anyone to go on with it if they asked for permission[15], the fact is that they put an end to the affair adducing the right of any person to worship the god of their choice.

Roman religious mentality, therefore, made reasoning like that of Tertullian's possible. However, such a categorical statement of an individual's religious freedom can only be understood in the framework of the spread of Christianity. In the Graeco-Roman world, individuals could be a devotee of one god rather than another, take part in one or other cult, and hold their own ideas about divinity, but that did not imply abandoning the community religious system or losing religious affiliation, which was tied to the condition of citizen. Christianity involved a radical change in the religious identity of the individual. It was not a religion associated with one state or people, but came with a universal vocation, and demanded a personal reflexive commitment and total involvement, excluding any other form of religious activity. With the spread of Christianity the relationship between the different religions became a topic of debate. However, Tertullian and the other apologists would not have developed the argument of religious freedom, which implies the aspect of toleration, if the Christians had not been persecuted. Indeed, neither Tertullian nor the other Christian intellectuals who demanded freedom were prepared, or capable of, accepting certain relativism, which is necessary for true religious toleration[16]. Christians were convinced they possessed the truth, a single truth, and that all other religious options were false. Despite the arguments in favour of religious freedom, they did not fully internalise the real idea of toleration. Not even the Christians who argued in favour of it, allowed it to be exercised within Christianity. Tertullian, who wrote a large amount of polemic literature against pagans, Jews and heretics, is a good example of these contradictions. In a book against heretics denouncing their malign action and enormous power, Tertullian defines a heretic as someone who has made an arbitrary choice and he

[15] North 2003, part. p. 208; Takács 2000; Ames 2008.
[16] Stroumsa 1998, part. p. 174.

insists that Christians are not allowed to introduce or choose anything new at their own free will[17].

The apologists wielded three kinds of arguments to support the freedom of worship[18]. The first, that not all the people worship the same gods, which differ from one province and city to another. Within the Roman Empire, there is a range of traditions, customs and laws, and with these, of religions, and nobody is punished because of that. Not all the subjects worship all the gods and yet they are not considered irreligious and atheists because of that. Nobody is stopped "either by law or by fear of punishment"[19] from honouring the traditions of their country, only the Christians are forbidden to do that. Christianity should be respected because Christians are a different race, the *tertium genus* (the 'third race') after Greeks and Jews, with their ancient customs rooted in the Old Testament. However, the apologists use the argument of the *tertium genus* ambiguously, when they stress the inclusive character of this new people, which differ from others not in its way of life or its culture, but in its beliefs. The fact that Christians presented themselves as foreign to Graeco-Roman culture gave their opponents arguments to accuse them of misanthropy and disloyalty to the Empire. Tertullian directly rejects the name of *tertium genus*, as if that term had been an invention of the Christians' enemies[20], and insists that they are loyal citizens to the Empire and fully integrated in it. As full citizens, Christians could claim the religious freedom that other subjects enjoyed. The conception of *libertas religionis* in Tertullian is closely connected with the political conception of Roman *libertas*.

The apologists' second argument in demanding freedom is the consideration of Christianity as a philosophy. If philosophers, they reasoned, were free to criticize Graeco-Roman cults, insult the gods and even teach atheism without anyone stopping them, then even more rightly so freedom and immunity should be given to the doctrine of the Christians, who profess the true philosophy. Their third and final argument was of a political-philosophical kind: toleration is reasonable and just, whereas persecution is irrational and tyrannical. Emperors must seek peace and not discord; above all when those who are persecuted do not harm anyone with their religion. Christians are

[17] Tert. *Praescr. haer.* IV 1, 3.
[18] Marcos 2007, pp. 67-75.
[19] Athenag. *Leg. pro Christ.* 1.
[20] Tert. *Ad nat.* I 8, 20; cfr. *Apolog.* VIII 5.

pacific and philanthropic, and no one has proved the accusation made against them. Their doctrines may be regarded as false, simple and ridiculous, but that does not justify persecution. One of the best pleas in favour of Christian pacifism and the value of persuasion in comparison with violence is to be found in the *Epistle to Diognetus*, a text dated between the second and third centuries. Its anonymous author regrets that Christians, who are no different from other citizens in their social behaviour, are persecuted by Jews and Greeks as if they were foreigners. They, in contrast, love their persecutors because "God sent his Son to persuade *(peithein)* and not to force, as violence has no place in the character of God"[21].

The violence of the Great Persecution initiated by Diocletian (303-313) stimulated a wider reflection on the illegitimacy of religious coercion. In a polemic with the pagan intelligentsia of his time, Lactantius (c. 240- c. 320) developed a discourse that is unique in Antique literature in favour of dialogue. Nothing is more voluntary than religion, he argues; the worship of a deity cannot be imposed (*religio cogi non potest*), nor can anyone be prevented from worshipping whom they like; for a sacrifice to be effective it must be done voluntarily and spontaneously; dialogue and persuasion are not used to attract Christians but violence and tortures, but nothing is achieved by force; on the contrary, the more Christians are persecuted, the more their numbers increase. Finally, Lactantius invite Roman priests and anyone with responsibilities in religious matters to engage in a public debate:

> "Let their priests come forth into the midst, whether the inferior ones or the greatest; their flamens, augurs, and also sacrificing kings, and the priests and ministers of their superstitions. Let them call us together to an assembly; let them exhort us to undertake the worship of their gods; let them persuade us that there are many beings by whose deity and providence all things are governed; let them show how the origins and beginnings of their sacred rites and gods were handed down to mortals; let them explain what is their source and principle; let them set forth what reward there is in their worship, and what punishment awaits neglect; why they wish to be worshipped by men; what the piety of men contributes to them, if they are blessed: and let them confirm all these things not by their own assertion (for the authority of a mortal man is of no weight), but by some divine

[21] *Epist. Diogn.* VII 5-6.

> testimonies, as we do. There is no occasion for violence and injury, for religion cannot be imposed by force; the matter must be carried on by words rather than by blows, that the will may be affected. Let them unsheath the weapon of their intellect; if their system is true, let it be asserted. We are prepared to hear, if they teach; while they are silent, we certainly pay no credit to them, as we do not yield to them even in their rage. Let them imitate us in setting forth the system of the whole matter: for we do not entice, as they say; but we teach, we prove, we show"[22].

But Lactantius's discourse on toleration and dialogue is highly rhetorical. Indeed, in the same work and in the same chapters, he displays not only great verbal violence against worshippers of traditional cults (whom he calls slaves of the demons, evil, ignorant, and depraved) but also extreme intolerance in pure religious terms: there is only one truth, Christianity, while traditional gods are false and worshipping them is not religion. Christians, as a persecuted minority, needed toleration and the discourse of religious freedom is a product of that circumstance. This discourse had its effects and the legal documents that decreed an end to the persecutions reflect that. In the language of Constantine, the first Christian emperor, the impact of these ideas can still be seen. Constantine used the coercive powers of the state to eliminate dissident Christians (Donatists, Arians), in the search for unity within the Church. He also acted against paganism, confiscating treasures in the temples and sacred places, and promoting or permitting the destruction of temples to build churches. However, in the 324 Constitution addressed to the provincials *On the Error of Polytheism*, Constantine advocates persuasion rather than coercion:

> "My own desire is, for the common good of the world and the advantage of all mankind, that thy people should enjoy a life of peace and undisturbed concord. Let those, therefore, who still delight in error, be made welcome to the same degree of peace and tranquility which they have who believe. For it may be that this restoration of equal privileges to all will prevail to lead them into the straight path. Let no one molest another, but let everyone do as his soul desires. Only let men of sound judgment be assured of this, that those only can live a life of holiness and purity, whom thou callest to a reliance on thy holy laws. With regard to those who will hold themselves aloof

[22] Lact. *Div*. *Inst* V 20 (trans. W. Fletcher). On the debate on toleration before and during the Great Persecution, see De Palma Digeser 1998.

> from us, let them have, if they please, their temples of lies: we have the glorious edifice of thy truth, which thou hast given us as our native home. We pray, however, that they too may receive the same blessing, and thus experience that heartfelt joy which unity of sentiment inspires (…) Once more, let none use that to the detriment of another which he may himself have received on conviction of its truth; but let everyone, if it be possible, apply what he has understood and known to the benefit of his neighbor; if otherwise, let him relinquish the attempt. For it is one thing voluntarily to undertake the conflict for immortality, another to compel others to do so from the fear of punishment"[23].

Like many Christians, Constantine hoped that paganism would soon disappear by itself while Christianity would triumph and impose itself naturally; so sure were the Christians of possessing the sole truth[24].

III. Post-Constantinian discourses on (in)tolerance

Christians abandoned the discourse of freedom and toleration as soon as the persecutions ended and Christianity became first a licit, privileged religion and by the end of the fourth century the state religion. What was the point of tolerating other opinions if one was sure of possessing the truth and had the political instruments to enforce it, in that way saving all humankind from error and certain condemnation? Firmicus Maternus, a pagan converted into Christianity, advocates active violence to eradicate paganism in a work entitled *The error of the pagan religions* (c. 346), dedicated to the Emperors Constantius and Constans[25]. The circumstances of Firmicus' conversion are not known, but he wrote this text with all the radicalism of a neophyte. He recalls the episode of the Bacchanalia to justify the intervention of the state in the eradication of paganism and urges the Emperors to set fire to the temples with the "flames of vengeance" (*flammis ultoricibus*), to come to the help of the unfortunate (*miserii*) with their laws and "free those who are dying" (*liberate pereuntes*), even if they do not want to be helped. In the final chapters of the treatise, Firmicus calls for the liquidation of idolatry

[23] Eus. Caes. *Vita Const*. II 56, 60 (trans. E.C. Richardson).
[24] On Constantine's often-discussed religious toleration, see Fernández Ubiña 2009.
[25] See the historical commentary of Sanzi 2006.

with the "murderous sword" (*caede gladii*) and for the physical extermination of the pagans. The people will arm themselves to cut to pieces the bodies of the sacrilegious (*ad discerpenda sacrilegorum corpora omnis populus armatur*).

We do not know how much Firmicus' work might have influenced the anti-pagan policies of Constantine's sons. However, it was in the 340s and 350s when severe legislation was introduced against paganism, with laws that order an end to sacrifices and include the death penalty for anyone who disobeyed them[26]. In a law dated in Constantius II's time regarding to haruspices, mathematici, diviners, and magicians, the term *gladius ultor* ("avenging sword") appears[27]. Firmicus uses the very same expression, inspired by the biblical text in Isaiah 27, 1: "In that day the Lord with his sore and great and strong sword shall punish leviathan the piercing serpent, even leviathan that crooked serpent; and he shall slay the dragon that is in the sea". Direct influence of Firmicus' ideas on imperial legislation cannot be proved, but it is true that the climate of anti-pagan and anti-heretic intolerance worsened in the second half of the fourth century, to reach the extremely severe legislation in the Theodosian period, with numerous episodes of coercion and violence, in many cases instigated and carried out by bishops and monks. Augustine's letter 93, justifying the use of coercion as an effective instrument of persuasion, attests the success of coercive policies. In fact, it would have been very difficult to finish the Donatist schism in North Africa if laws had not been toughened in the early fifth century, at the Catholics' request. Christianity would doubtlessly have been less successful without the force of imperial legislation.

Despite legitimizing the use of coercion, Augustine expressed his doubts about the validity of forced conversions, and always preferred persuasion to coercion. However, not all the bishops were as scrupulous in these matters as he was. In about 400, Porphyry, bishop of Gaza, began a crusade to eradicate paganism from the town. The violent episodes provoked by his anti-pagan campaign is well known as it is the central theme in Porphyry's biography, written by a witness, his collaborator Mark the Deacon[28]. When Porphyry and Marcus arrived in the town, the Christians were a small minority of

[26] *Cod. Theod.* XVI 10, 5 (a. 353), 6 (a. 356). On the anti-pagan legislation of Constans and Constantius, see Cuneo 1997.
[27] *Cod. Theod.* IX 16, 4.
[28] See the historical commentary of Teja 2008.

about 280. This figure slowly increased as Porphyry went performing miracles. From Emperor Arcadius he obtained an edict and soldiers in order first to close and then to demolish the pagan temples in Gaza, including the Marneion, the great shrine dedicated to Zeus-Marnas. After it had been destroyed, Porphyry went on to enter every house to burn the pagans' idols and sacred books. As a consequence of these actions – Mark says – the pagans began to convert *en masse* "some out of fear and others out of repentance for the former way of life"[29]. Some of the Christians complained to the bishop that he should not accept those who embraced the faith out of fear (*phobos*) but only those who converted sincerely. Porphyry then explained why those who converted out of fear should not be rejected:

> "When we are not persuaded, desiring in all things like a good and merciful master to keep us and not to thrust us away, he (God) layeth upon us his fear and his teaching, calling us of necessity to acknowledge that which behoveth us. Therefore the divine scripture saith: «When he slew them, then they sought him, and they returned and inquired early after God» (Ps 78:34 [77:34]). And again it saith concerning them who behave themselves unruly and stiffen their necks against God: «With muzzle and bridle ye shall hold in their jaws lest they come nigh thee» (Ps 32:9 [31:9]). It is needful therefore, my children, that mankind be admonished by fear and threats and discipline. Therefore again it saith: «It is good for me that thou hast humbled me, that I may learn thy statutes» (Ps 99:71 [98:71]). These things have I said because of those who desire to come unto our holy faith. For even if they come doubting, time is able to soften their hearts, if Christ consent. But, that I may tell you yet another thing, even though they be not seen to be worthy if the faith, having been already in a state of evil, they that are born of them can be saved, by having converse with the good"[30].

Late Antiquity Christians cannot be said to have been pessimistic about the future of their religion. Nor that the intellectuals' thought was always consistent. As a final example, John Chrysostom's ideas about coercion were ambiguous and sometimes contradictory, which was not infrequent among the Christians of his time. Thought Chrysostom did not reflect expressly on the idea of coercion, circumstantial references to religious violence can be found in his

[29] Marc. Diac. *Vita Porph*.72-73.
[30] Marc. Diac. *Vita Porph*. 73 (trans. G.F. Hill).

work. This is the case of his treatise *On saint Babylas*, a mid-third century martyr, whose *martyrium* on the suburbs of Antioch had been withdrawn by Emperor Julian at the pagans' request. In *On Babylas*, written in c. 379-380, Chrysostom makes an apology of Christian pacifism[31]. By the same time, in a homily addressed to the citizens of Antioch (a. 387) dealing with very different and apparently unconnected matters (moderation in wine-drinking, the effects of drunkenness, patience against adversities), Chrysostom urges his faithful to act against blasphemers in these terms:

> "But since our discourse has now turned to the subject of blasphemy, I desire to ask one favor of you all, in return for this my address, and speaking with you; which is, that you will correct on my behalf the blasphemers of this city. And should you hear any one in the public thoroughfare, or in the midst of the forum, blaspheming God; go up to him and rebuke him; and should it be necessary to inflict blows, spare not to do so. Smite him on the face; strike his mouth; sanctify your hand with the blow, and if any should accuse you, and drag you to the place of justice, follow them there; and when the judge on the bench calls you to account, say boldly that the man blasphemed the King of angels! For if it be necessary to punish those who blaspheme an earthly king, much more so those who insult God. It is a common crime, a public injury; and it is lawful for every one who is willing, to bring forward an accusation. Let the Jews and Greeks learn, that the Christians are the saviours of the city; that they are its guardians, its patrons, and its teachers. Let the dissolute and the perverse also learn this; that they must fear the servants of God too; that if at any time they are inclined to utter such a thing, they may look round every way at each other, and tremble even at their own shadows, anxious lest perchance a Christian, having heard what they said, should spring upon them and sharply chastise them"[32].

These contradictions are not surprising. As Guy Stroumsa has written, two tendencies, one eristic and one irenic, are to be found in Early Christianity. The discourse developed by a persecuted minority was one thing, and the discourse of a persecutory religion was another. Theory and practice were two different matters. These are typical paradoxes of a dynamic religious movement, which made Christianity, the religion of love thy neighbour, put into practice forms

[31] Ioann. Chrys. *de sancto Babyla* 13.
[32] Ioann. Chrys. *Hom. in statuas* 1, 32 (trans. W.R.W. Stephens).

of violence and intolerance hitherto unknown in the context of ancient religions.

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