

# The Cultural Construction of Religious Alterity in the Late Antique Mediterranean World (IV-IX cent.)

## POSITION PAPER

### Introduction

The fall of the Roman Empire represented for a long time an epoch-making break between the splendour of the Classic World and the darkness of the Early Middle Ages. It was a common opinion that the period between the dissolution of the Roman Empire and the formation of the new states both in the West and in the East was marked out by an overall decline in literature, arts and science. Gradually, scholars began to re-shape the value as epoch-making of this event and, at the same time, to re-evaluate this chronological period, considering with more attention its specific features, and emancipating it from the lumbering comparison with the Classic World. If the perception of important element of innovation before the barbaric invasion emerged already in the works of historians of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, such as Edward Gibbon and Jacob Burckhardt, it was only with the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the last centuries of Antiquity and the first of the Middle Ages were fully re-considered. The first to fulfil this task was the Austrian Alois Riegl (*Die spättrömische Kunstindustrie nach den Funden in Österreich-Ungarn* (1901), who proposed to reinterpret the art history between Constantine and Charlemagne as a period with specific features and to call it Late Antiquity or Late Roman. Later, the posthumous publication of the volume *Mahomet et Charlemagne* (1937), by the Belgian Henri Pirenne, whose focus was to delineate the boundary between Antiquity and Middle Ages, contributed, though remaining within an interpretative scheme deeply traditional, to widen the usual chronological limits, up to the Islamic invasion in the VII century.

Since its first appearance, the concept of Late Antiquity was not linked with political or military facts, but with the diffusion of specific cultural elements and material innovations. From this viewpoint, the huge presence of elements of change and continuity emerged as characterizing feature, a twist which contains in itself both the transformation of the Classical World and the prelude of the yet to come Middle Ages. This change of tendency involved, especially in historiography, an enlargement of the chronological and geographical limits: from a perspective centred on the Western Roman Empire to one opened to the whole Mediterranean, from an analysis interested in finding the causes of crisis in the Classic World, to one concerned with the specific features of this liminal epoch.

From the 40s and 50s of the 20th century, thanks to the contribution of a new generation of historians, such as Santo Mazzarino, André Piganiol and Henri-Irénée Marrou, the Late Antique World witnessed a remarkable valorisation. However, this category assumed a relevant autonomy only after the book *The World of Late Antiquity* (1971) by Peter Brown, which explained both the crisis of Antiquity and the transforming processes that would have led to the birth of the Middle Ages and enlarged this period up to including the inception of Islamic civilization.

A contribution of equal importance was provided by the analysis of religious phenomenon. According to the historiographical approach of Garth Fowden, presented in *Empire to*

*Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (1993), the specific feature of Late Antiquity was the emergence of monotheisms and their alliance with the political powers. However, the following tensions between orthodoxy and heresy led to the dissolution of this unity, sanctioning the passage to the pluralistic commonwealth, distinctive of Eastern Christianity and Islam.

### **Declaration of intent**

The chronology selected for the workshop (IV-IX centuries C.E.) is delimited in its beginning by the transition to monotheisms, symbolically represented by the adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire. The closure of the chosen period is characterized by the alliance between religious and political universalisms, which in this age resulted in some of its most prominent historical outcomes: in Europe coexisted the ecumenical projects of Carolingian and Byzantine empires, which expanded Christianity in the north-eastern regions of the continent, thus laying the foundations of medieval European Christendom; in the Near East, the Abbasid Caliphate inaugurated the Golden Age of Muslim Empire, which was characterized by the culmination of the formative process of Islamic culture and religion.

The main aim of this workshop lies in the analysis of the cultural strategies adopted to construct religious alterity in the Late Antique Mediterranean World (IV-IX C.E.). This age was full of inter-religious encounters, contaminations and struggles; Christianity and Islam interacted with all the previous monotheistic and polytheistic beliefs, all over the Mediterranean area: Judaism, Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism, Paganisms. The resulting confrontation gave a primary contribution to the definition and perception of the “other”. This continuous process was not exclusively directed to the outside (i.e. the other religious faiths), but also towards the inside, against dissident groups, with sectarian conflicts intensifying during periods of major strife. The new-come universalistic confessions burst in a complex and ever-changing religious framework. Unlike most of the pre-existent beliefs, monotheisms declared their intolerance towards syncretism, and were continuously struggling to assert their uniformity in contrast to polytheism. Nonetheless, this mind-set clashed with the inevitable fragmentation of these new beliefs, and with the contamination of elements derived from other cults (e.g. the absorption of pagan elements during the formative process of Christianity). These new faiths appeared in a religious context of unprecedented turmoil, upset by the circulation of eastern, esoteric and messianic beliefs, which spread during the Imperial age.

The continuous defining process of alterity found expression in a wide variety of literary genres, such as theological treatises, heresiological catalogues, chronicles, homilies, professions of faith, conciliar documents, historiographical narrations, apocalypses and visions. This multiplicity of literary genres was expressed in many of the different idioms, which constituted the linguistic spectrum of Late Antique Mediterranean (Latin, Greek, Arabic, Hebrew, Syriac, Middle Persian, Coptic, Georgian, Armenian, Ethiopic).

The evaluation of this complex cultural framework is of crucial importance for the understanding of the strategies at work in the construction of religious alterity; it also brings up several questions: How did the new monotheisms relate to the pre-existent cults and how they encompassed them inside their universalistic project? How did these pre-existent beliefs build the cultural image of the newcomers and what place did they assign them inside their vision of History? How did political power participate in the process of construction of religious alterity? How did the universalisms deal with their unavoidable fragmentation? Which were the textual and iconographic sources for the depiction of religious alterity? Which information can the analysis of the

representation of religious alterity provide as a specular depiction of the sectarian identity of the different cults?

The area of interest is the Mediterranean region, interpreted in a broader sense, which encompasses all of the ancient world centred on the Roman Empire; this region during Late Antiquity became the area of spreading of the monotheisms.

The Call for Papers is open to paper proposals in Italian, English and French, coming from Ph.D. Students, Researchers and Professors. We invite abstracts up to 350 words; the presentations will last for 20 minutes, and will be followed by 10 minutes of debate.