

Introduction to *Journal of Religion and Violence* 9(2–3)

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This issue of the *Journal of Religion and Violence* offers a mix of topics related to our core subjects of religion and violence. These range from Christian militarism against Roman temples in the late fourth century to contemporary Russian religious nationalism. Along the way we cover Greek and Chinese legendary warriors, child sex ratios per religious affiliation in India, and Yemeni hunger strikers in religious and political contexts. The whole issue was a long time in coming, as our original contributors, invitees on the subject of women, religion, and violence, were beset by a number of mishaps during the pandemic. Yet we adapted and offer now a smorgasbord of topics. As usual, the introduction summarizes the issue's contents.

Proceeding in the historical order of the subjects, we begin with John Shean's "The Destruction of the Serapeum in 391: Religious Violence and Intolerance in an Imperial Age." The Serapeum, a temple dedicated to the popular worship of Isis with child (conceived by the fourth century as parallel to Mary with child) and Serapis (a Ptolemaic fusion of gods Osiris and bull-god Apis, conceived by this time as a bearded deity much like Zeus or even Jesus), was one of several conflict points between Christians and pagans. After Constantine's conversion, a number of Roman emperors involved themselves increasingly in disputes regarding religion and showed themselves as inclined to "demonstrate to the wider imperial community that the Roman state was no longer interested in protecting targeted cult sites from Christian militants, and that the perpetrators of such violence would suffer no negative consequences for their actions." Ambrose was a key figure in sanctioning the activism of Roman emperors in religious affairs, which resulted ultimately not only in the destruction of pagan temples and Jewish synagogues, but also in the prohibition of pagan sacrifices, particularly after Theodosius's edict of

391. Theophilus, bishop of Alexandria, was another key figure, noted to be aggressive in anti-pagan campaigns and keen on winning religious space for the growing Christian community in Alexandria, particularly at the Serapeum, an elaborate structure located on a high acropolis and housing an annex of the Great Library of Alexandria. In 391, Theophilus read a rescript exiling pagans from the site and then led a mob of Christians and soldiers to destroy the temple. Eventually he leveled the site and built a church in its place, beginning a process by which all the other pagan and Jewish sites and icons in Alexandria were systematically destroyed and replaced by Christian buildings and icons. This was a watershed moment that ended non-Christian religion in the land and demonstrated that Christian militants could act with impunity.

We next offer Don Wyatt's "Not by Valor or Victory Alone: Religious Agency in the Apotheosis of the Chinese Warrior." Beginning with the enigma of apotheosized warriors who win immortality by killing, but also dying, violently, Wyatt traces the transformation of a valorous but very human warrior into a god in both ancient Greece and China. He begins with Alexander the Great (356–323 BCE), whose famed military conquests extended from Greece all the way to India and who, before the end of his young life, requested that Greek city-states honor him as a god. Even while alive, Alexander identified with Greek hero Achilles, offering gifts at his supposed tomb at Troy, as well as with Heracles, archetypal hero whose exploits took him all over the known Greek world. Both of course claimed divine lineage. In addition, he managed to identify himself with god Dionysos, whose birth by very human Semele was mythologically problematic and who, according to Euripides, zealously extended his cult eastward as well (*Bacchae* 1–64). Beyond these mythological nexuses, Alexander was politically forceful in pressing for his own divinization during his scant dozen years as warrior-chief. On the Chinese side, Guan Yu (d. ca 220 CE) was an equally famous warrior whose feats in combat earned him ascension to divine status during the seventeenth century. He too enjoyed brief years as a man of war (only fifteen), but came to be known not for his personal ambition and expansionist aims, but rather for his loyalty to fellow comrades in arms and his defense of a crumbling empire. However ignoble his death by beheading, centuries later the Buddhist Jade Spring Monastery adopted him as a tutelary deity, followed by Daoist ritualists appropriating him as a militant protector and exorcist of all manner of baleful threats. Whereas the Buddhists attributed him eventually quasi-bodhisattva status, the Daoists conceived of him as a bellicose expiator of malevolent spirits, including dragons and demons as well as diseases. Aside from the question of why such divergent religious hypostases, the question which drives Don Wyatt is why Guan Yu? Noting that Guan Yu's status endured for millennia (whereas Al-

exander's just a few centuries), Wyatt notes Yue Fe's emulation of Guan Yu in the twelfth century. Yue Fe's motives, accomplishments, and tragic end led him to be venerated as a close second to Guan Yu, with the distinction that Yue Fe was associated with a temple commemorating his national heroism and noble death merely eighty years after his demise. The ethnonationalist reverence for Yue Fe was not identical in kind to the Buddhist and Daoist uses of Guan Yu, but a case can be made for the veneration of loyalty as a key virtue enabling both to represent a cherished Confucian ideal, however ambiguous that ideal across contexts.

Next, in "Understanding India's Uneven Sex Ratios: A Comparative Religions Approach," Andrea Malji explores the uneven sex ratios across India's diverse religious communities. Statistical approximations indicate that 13.5 million females which should exist today in India, considering natural birth ratios, do not exist. While noting that no religious community is monolithic in belief and practice, the study explores statistical sex ratios among Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Jains, Christians, Buddhists, and animists. Broadly speaking, Indian sex preferences for males are attributed to the pervasive need for offering dowries for brides; the custom of male children inheriting responsibility for care of parents; poverty, which in turn impacts education and age of marriage for girls; the uneven impact of British colonialism, which encoded patriarchal inheritance laws differently per region; and soil types from north to south and the extent to which animal instead of women's labor is required for agricultural work. As for individual religious traditions, Christians, residing mostly in India's northeast and also in the very south among Keralans, are the only community with a sex ratio above 1000 females to 1000 males in India. Since the northeastern Christians are also among the Scheduled Tribes, with their own cultural practices, it is difficult to pinpoint religion as a single causal factor for this elevation of women, despite proselytizing against abortion by evangelical leaders. Animists who have not been Christianized also have high female to male sex ratios. Since traditionally many have preserved matrilineal customs, it is perhaps not surprising that they value female births. The fact that most animists remain marginalized in terms of health care and education shows that these cannot be deemed determinative for sex preference. Buddhists across south and southeast Asia report largely equal sex ratios, although among Buddhists in India there are still considerably uneven sex ratios, pending region. Jains are famously dedicated to non-injury to all living things and therefore it would be surprising were there conspicuous femicidal practices. Yet, despite their ahimsa and generally high literacy rates, their sex ratios are relatively low, 940 women per 1000 men, with much lower ratios for children aged 1–6. Their relative affluence and ability to travel outside India

for sex selection may offer an explanation. Muslims, who have been present in India since the seventh century, brought with them initially a variety of cultural orientations, since they were Turks, Mongols, Afghans, Persians, Arabs. Later incursions were mostly Turks, whose influence was both more restrictive for women (e.g., *purdah*) as well as more supportive (inheritance rights). In terms of sex ratios today there is huge discrepancy between, for instance, Bangladesh (1020 women per 1000 men) and Pakistan (950 women per 1000 men), which suggests again that regional factors must be considered for analysis. Nor can Hindus be universalized in terms of sex preferences; some Hindu majority states, such as Haryana, have very low sex ratios (833 girls per 1000 boys), while Kerala has very high ratios (1084 to 1000). Hindu nationalists argue that powerful female deities influence women's reproductive choices and that abortion is frowned upon as a violation of *ahimsa*. Yet abortion is widely practiced throughout India. It is Sikhs who have the lowest sex ratio (893: 1000), although femicide and sex selection are widely condemned by contemporary Sikh leaders and organizations. A history of conflict, largely against invaders, is one factor attributed to the imbalance, as well as Sikh legacy of warriors, although how this supports the sex ratios is not transparent.

Next Flagg Miller offers "Muslim Hunger Strikes as Secular Critique in Yemen." He begins by noting a Yemeni frustration with what are called religious groups as well as with state responses to them. The 2017 hunger strikers, by enduring long fasts which reduced their bodies to bones, seemed to enlist what Achille Mbembé called the "necropolitical." That is, the emaciated bodies, suggesting living death, became conspicuous protests against corrupt regimes. The immediate political roots of the Yemeni movement extend back to 2014, when northern, Zaidi Shia (Houthi), tribes seized power from what were perceived to be Saudi salafi representatives, spurring Saudi military attacks with support from the United States, who collectively feared the Zaidi led movement as unlikely to withstand the influence of Iran's twelver Shia majority in the region. Despite the Houthi government's attempts to provide basic services during this onslaught, violence and mass starvation followed. On May 20, 2017, Yemeni parliamentarian Ahmed Saif Hashed mounted public resistance to the Houthi regime, to protest the lack of salaries and pensions owing some 200,000 state workers. Due in part to his reputation as a participant in the Arab spring protests in 2011 as well as his platform emphasizing nonviolence, commitment to democracy, and resistance to the imperialist aims of outside Muslim groups, he succeeded in drawing supporters to demonstrate against the government and its withholding of salaries, but to no avail. When the government did not respond he began his 14-day hunger strike on August 15, 2017. For all its Gandhian associations, hunger striking has a unique legacy

in Muslim quarters, given the Palestinian prisoners “Battle of the Empty Stomachs” in 1976, Western Saharan activists protesting Morocco’s territorial annexation in 1975, hunger striking protests against Israeli land annexations in the 1960s, pan-Arab hunger strikes protesting British authoritarianism in Egypt in 1948, and on and on, even is revered by Muslims in the cases of non-Muslim hunger protests, such as the nineteenth century Russian female socialists and early twentieth century English suffragettes. Yemen too has its own history of hunger-striking, stemming from the 1960s independence movement. All of these may be understood as expressions of what Achille Mbembé called necropolitics, but they also fit an Islamic ethos stemming in part from the pillar of fasting during Ramadan, and in part from a hadith reporting the Prophet’s urging that one fast during the final day of the Hajj to expiate the sins of the previous year. However controversial—as denial of the body is not an intrinsically good thing in Islamic ethical thinking—these traditions helped to support and popularize the movement. Even after Hashed succeeded in gaining some small concessions from the government at the end of his fast, others took up the mantle and launched their own fasts in different cities at different holidays. Hashed’s autobiographical writings ponder ways to understand the heart, not the letter, of Islamic strictures, and are in line with other existential ponderings within the tradition.

A most timely essay is then offered by Nick Blasco, “Russian Orthodoxy, Militant Internationalism, Anti-Americanism in Post-Soviet Russia.” It is well-known that President Putin has enlisted the support of the Russian Orthodox Church to support his crusade against Western ideology, which he has associated with LGBTQ rights and other liberal democratic values. Recovering Russia’s hegemonic sphere, a Greater Rus, is an important goal of the Russian Federation, which has felt dismissed by the West as less than a major world power. Like China, Russia desires to offer alternatives to the western hegemon for the developing world. In this Putin has the full backing of the Russian Orthodox Church with Patriarch Kirill at its helm. Sovereignty, or “spiritual freedom,” a strong defense, and maintaining Russian honor and cultural loyalty are three major concepts for the Russian Orthodox Church, and all three are currently tied to the political purpose of the state. Aggressive Orthodox fundamentalism is tied with the rejection of modernity and exploits political rhetoric enlisting past wars and grievances, from the Byzantine Empire to World War II, to justify military action. We see this in the conflict in Ukraine, which Kirill equates to a test of faith and culture, and to salvation from the sins of the West, such as homosexuality. Blasco compares Kirill’s attempts to reinvigorate national identity to the efforts of, say, the Muslim Brotherhood, despite their differing religious orientations. Data sets measuring attitudes

concerning Orthodox religious identity, proneness to militarism, militant internationalism, and anti-Americanism from 2011 to 2016 are compared and found to be related, although the data is almost exclusively drawn from male Russians from age eighteen to mid-fortys and only in those select years. We rarely publish data sets at the JRV, but this one is sure to attract attention.