
Entanglements of Religion and Empire

Over the past generation, a broad consensus has been reached that the category of “religion” as it exists in modernity does not map onto a clearly delineated discursive domain in the ancient Mediterranean and West Asian world—or in other premodern and non-Western contexts, for that matter.¹ Some have gone further and argued that the application of the term *religion* to ancient contexts at best occludes the organization of those societies and cultures and even distorts historical understanding.² To what extent historical developments within the world of Late Antiquity prefigured or conditioned the emergence of the discourse of religion in early modern Europe remains hotly debated.³ Nonetheless, few scholars would now insist on treating “religion” as a discrete experiential, epistemological, or legal domain disembodied from the political, economic, military, and scientific spheres of social life during the period of Late Antiquity.

But this foundational insight into the contingent nature of the discourse of religion has hardly dampened interest in the workings within late ancient societies of those assemblages of symbolic actions and practical activities that modern scholars call “religions.” Indeed, if ancient imperial states—in addition to being structures of exchange and taxation, governance and law, and

1. On the modern invention of “religion” as a distinct discursive category, see the seminal statements in Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), and Jonathan Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 269–84.

2. See especially Carlin A. Barton and Daniel Boyarin, *Imagine No Religion: How Modern Abstractions Hide Ancient Realities* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), and Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

3. For an insightful overview of this debate, see Jonathan P. Decker, “*Al-Yahūdiyya*: The Emergence of a Comparative Framework in Medieval Jewish Thought,” *Journal of Religion* 101 (2021): 299–325, esp. 299–301, and the literature cited there.

violence and coercive force—were also large-scale ritual communities that were understood to depend on the proper cultivation of divine oversight and beneficence, how should the entanglements of religion with empire best be conceptualized and studied?⁴

This question is especially poignant when we consider cases in which the structures of religious affiliation were in tension with the logic of imperial domination. Most obviously, the needs of the state might diverge from the interests of the very state-sponsored religious institutions that were so instrumental in the practical and ideological management of the empire.⁵ Even more illuminating, however, were the periodic attempts by imperial authorities in both the Roman and Sasanian empires of Late Antiquity to supervise, manage, or even suppress “religious communities” that had adopted—or were thought to have adopted—a wary or potentially subversive posture toward the state.⁶ The chronology, pace, and extent of this process remain open questions. I think it is undeniable, however, that, in some cases, the intensifying alignment in this period between the state and a chosen (version of) imperial cult both sharpened and hardened the edges around religious identities. At the same time, this process of differentiation and domination—ironically, if unsurprisingly—also laid bare the limits of imperial control over society.

Several of the papers in this issue of *Studies in Late Antiquity* focus attention on imperial efforts to manage the immense social and symbolic potency that inhered in religious forms and practices. Diliانا Angelova’s “Constantine’s Radiate Statue and the Founding of Constantinople” carefully scrutinizes the rhetorical significance of the *corona radiata*, the crown of

4. The scholarly literature on the “religious” dimension of civic and imperial institutions in the ancient Mediterranean world is vast. For a lucid and accessible treatment of the issue, see James B. Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 13–53, 108–22.

5. Examples of tension between ancient imperial states and the leadership of religious cults or communities sponsored by those states are legion. Perhaps the most fully studied case is the later Roman empire of the late fourth and fifth centuries, in which the institutional forces of the Christian church and the empire intersected at times but diverged at others. See Fergus Millar, *A Greek Roman Empire: Power and Belief under Theodosius II, 408–450* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), esp. 140–48.

6. Among the many examples that one might invoke, I would highlight the particular role of imperial control, force, and indeed violence in the formation of distinct Manichaean and so-called Donatist communities in the third to fifth centuries. See, respectively, Jason BeDuhn, “Mani and the Crystallization of the Concept of ‘Religion’ in Third Century Iran,” in *Mani at the Court of the Persian Kings: Studies on the Chester Beatty Kephalaia Codex*, ed. Iain Gardner, Jason BeDuhn, and Paul Dille (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 247–76, and Brent D. Shaw, *Sacred Violence: African Christians and Sectarian Hatred in the Age of Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

rays, within Constantinian imperial propaganda, especially in the bronze statue of Constantine that the emperor erected in the forum of his newly founded city of Constantinople. She argues that the *corona radiata* did not index Constantine's attachment to a personal patron deity, such as Sol or Christ, but instead drew on a long-standing Roman iconographic tradition that reached back to the earliest days of the empire and was meant to mark him, like his predecessors, as the latest manifestation of Divine Augustus. Angelova views Constantine's use of the radiate crown as a sign of his ideological commitment to making room for both Christians and non-Christians under the "big tent" of imperial religion. In topping his statue with this particular symbol, Constantine signaled that Constantinople was to be a second Rome, meant for all Romans, rather than a capital of a starkly Christian empire.

Simcha Gross likewise considers imperial attempts to navigate the shifting religious landscapes of this formative period. But his essay, "Being Roman in the Sasanian Empire: Revisiting the Great Persecution under Shapur II," considers the world of Late Antiquity from the vantage point of the Sasanian Empire, where Christianity represented a potential source of resistance to the state. Gross finds himself unpersuaded by recent strands of revisionist historiography that have questioned the historicity of Christian narratives of persecution at the hands of the Sasanian authorities, especially in the wake of Constantine's conversion to Christianity. Instead, he draws on a wide range of evidence—from Middle Persian inscriptions to Syriac martyrologies to the Babylonian Talmud—that supports the view that, because of its ongoing military conflict with the Roman Empire, the Sasanian state viewed the loyalty of its Christian subjects with suspicion. Sasanian accusations that Christians formed a fifth column within their empire, however, did not lead to wholesale persecution. Rather, Sasanian authorities adopted policies toward Christian communities and their leaders that, depending on the circumstances, alternated tactically between targeted acts of suppression, on the one hand, and sophisticated strategies of cooptation, on the other. The Jewish communities of the Sasanian Empire apparently did not face comparable scrutiny and harassment or generate new narratives of persecution at the hands of their imperial rulers. This contrast between the Jewish and Christian experience confirms for Gross that Christians came to occupy a distinctively sensitive and at times perilous position within the Sasanian Empire just as Rome embraced Christianity as its primary—and then sole—state-sponsored religion.

The heated discourse of heresy, which was such a pronounced facet of Christian culture in Late Antiquity, could likewise become entangled with matters of imperial interest and policy. Sihong Lin's "Justinian's Frankish War, 552–ca. 560" illuminates the critical role that disagreements regarding correct doctrine might play in informing the diplomatic strategies and military objectives of warring parties. Lin sets out to reconstruct—as best he can, given the fragmentary nature of the sources—the trajectory of the military conflict between the Eastern Roman state ruled by Justinian and the Frankish forces in Gaul and Italy during the 550s. In order to fill out our understanding of this poorly documented chapter in the intertwined histories of the Roman, Merovingian, and Frankish polities, Lin supplements the patchy picture that emerges from the extant historiographic sources with writings that document the doctrinal debates that raged throughout the 540s and 550s. The central theological controversy in this period, known as the Three Chapters, operated in tandem with other forces—cultural, diplomatic, military, and economic—that alternately fortified or fractured the always-shifting networks that linked the Frankish kingdom of Gaul and northern Italy to the Mediterranean worlds of Rome and Constantinople.

The final paper in this issue shifts away from the macrostructures of religion and empire to consider the small-scale, even intimate, spaces of literary production in antiquity. If we should approach "religion" as a historically contingent category, so, too, must we be attentive to the genealogy of "authorship" and to how this notion has been applied by scholars to our ancient evidence. Candida Moss takes up this problematic in "Between the Lines: Looking for the Contributions of Enslaved Literate Laborers in a Second-Century Text (*P. Berol* 11632)," seeking to excavate the role that enslaved workers played in the composition of ancient literary texts. While it is well known that elite authors depended on slave labor to transcribe, record, or copy texts of all kinds—from financial and legal documents to letters and literary works—just how to parse the traces of this social dynamic within the textual record is far from clear. To gain a purchase on the process of textual production, Moss closely scrutinizes a papyrus fragment that is particularly dense with scribal corrections and emendations. This fragment, which contains a prose account of the siege of Rhodes by Demetrios Poliorcetes in 304 BCE, serves as an excellent candidate for discerning the various types of collaboration that might have obtained between masters and their enslaved secretaries as well as the specific social circumstances in which the work of literary creation took place. Moss enriches her rigorous philological approach

with the method of *critical fabulation*, which has been developed by scholars of modern slavery to write the otherwise invisible histories of enslaved persons. Her analysis not only discloses the agency that the enslaved laborer might play in the process of literary production in antiquity but also challenges the Romantic image of the ancient author as an autonomous agent—a solitary genius—of which modern scholarship has so long been enamored. Moss’s insight holds equally true, I think, for the theological, philosophical, and legal writings produced by the elites or sub-elites of Late Antiquity and for classicizing historical or literary texts like *P. Berol* 11632.