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**Religion, COVID-19, and Biocultural Evolution:  
Introducing a Special Issue focusing on  
Religion and the COVID-19 Pandemic**

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*Introduction*

As this special issue goes to press we are entering a third year of the coronavirus pandemic, with global deaths at 5.4 million and rising (COVID-19 Dashboard 2021).<sup>1</sup> A February 2021 Pew Research Center poll asking people what they think life will be like in 2025 captured the current zeitgeist: ‘A plurality of experts think sweeping societal change will make life worse for most people as greater inequality, rising authoritarianism and rampant misinformation take hold in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak’ (Anderson, Rainie, and Vogels 2021). The *Global State of Democracy in 2021* report from the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) similarly warned that democracies around the world are facing ‘a perfect storm of threats, both from within and from a rising tide of authoritarianism’ (2021: vii). In 2021, three broad responses to the pandemic—acceptance, skepticism, and denial—played important roles. And in all these trends religion was entangled deeply with the virus and the diverse cultural responses to it around the world.

1. We use COVID-19, coronavirus, pandemic, and virus as interchangeable terms for the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

Nowhere was this more obvious than in the United States, when on 6 January 2021 supporters of then-President Trump responded to his rabble-rousing speech to march on the capital by launching what can only be called an attempted coup. Among the insurrectionists was the ‘QAnon Shaman’, Jake Angeli, wearing a fur-covered buffalo helmet and patriotic face paint, who well symbolized the potent mix of religious nationalism and oftentimes bizarre conspiratorial beliefs and right-wing politics. Speaking from jail to the *Conservative Daily*, Angeli declared ‘This is spiritual warfare, gentlemen. And the fact of the matter is, we are winning’. He continued explaining, in a way that resembled some New Age understandings (Taylor 1997), that his role as a shaman:

...is to be the one that fights the spiritual war for the people. To be the one that shows the people the flaws within its system, within its culture, and helps them to repair those flaws. The shaman is the visionary. The shaman is the one that understands and lives in two worlds at once, the spirit world and the physical world. So as far as I’m concerned, like I said, I am whatever the country, whatever the world, needs me to be. (Conservative Daily 2021)

Angeli’s idiosyncratic understanding of shamanism and his role as a shaman contrasts sharply with shamans deeply rooted in Indigenous traditions, such as the case of Baniwa elder and jaguar shaman Mandu, whom Robin Wright discusses in this issue. But his case provides a striking example of the malleability of religion and the innovative role it can play in high stakes social conflicts exacerbated, if not precipitated, by pandemics.

In South Korea, the Shincheonji Church of Jesus, led by pastor Lee Man-Hee, was blamed for sparking one of the largest viral outbreaks in South Korea that was linked to church activities, a case similar to a February 2020 super spreader event in France discussed by Lionel Obadia in this issue. In both cases, religious beliefs and actors were blamed for accelerating the pandemic. Combined with their aggressive proselytization methods, these revelations led some observers to label the group a dangerous religious cult (Park 2020). Despite the negative attention and associated public scandals, Shincheonji announced in late December 2021 they had gained nearly 20,000 new converts last year (PR Newswire 2021), a phenomenon that speaks to the dynamic growth of Pentecostal and charismatic religions in recent years (Vijgen and van der Haak 2015), and which raises an interesting question: Does a pandemic increase the numbers of devotees in some religious groups, and if so, why, and which ones? A kindred question is whether a pandemic erodes or deepens the faith of devotees. A 2020 Pew Research Center survey on religion and the pandemic across 14 advanced economies found the

most dramatic impacts on religion in the United States, with nearly half of white evangelical Protestants claiming their faith had grown thanks to COVID-19, compared to only 35% for Catholics, 21% for white mainline Protestants, and 5% for those with no religious affiliation. Across all 14 countries, 66% of respondents said religious views had not changed at all, 15% said that religion had strengthened, and 8% said it was declining (Sahgal and Connaughton 2020: 9-10).

In South Asia, religious groups and NGOs launched the Awareness with Human Action project (AHA!) in response to the pandemic. Its goal has been to 'promote awareness of COVID-19 and constructive narratives that reduce discrimination, hate speech, and stigmatization' by recruiting 'religious leaders, women, and youth leaders as community influencers' (The Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers 2021). Responding to such religious trends, researchers at the Religion and Globalisation Cluster at the Asia Research Institute in Singapore launched a website called CoronAsur, which is dedicated to tracking responses to the pandemic, drawing its name from Hindu and Buddhist beliefs in Asuras, spiritual beings who often have malevolent intentions and intervene in the world (CoronAsur 2021).

In the Middle East, the city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia, where the annual *Hajj* or Islamic pilgrimage occurs, reopened in 2021 after having closed to foreigners in 2020 (Al-Kinani 2020). In east Africa, the Nairobi-based All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) has labored to educate people on the risks of Pentecostal misinformation about COVID-19. As Rev. Simangaliso Kumalo, a religion professor at the University of KwaZulu-Natal-Pietermaritzburg noted, many pastors in Kenya wrongly believed COVID-19 is more than a virus, leading them to tell followers that 'because members of Pentecostal churches are children of God, the virus would not infect them, or if it does, they would be healed by Jesus, the physician' (quoted in Nzwili 2021).

This idea, that COVID-19 may be caused by an imbalance, whether religious (e.g., sinful behavior, lack of proper rituals, angry nature spirits) or secular (e.g., climate change, genetic engineering, capitalism), was evident in many pandemic discourses. For example, Lorea (2020) describes a Hindu leader who argued that 'the virus is an *avatara* descended on earth to restore the universal balance which deteriorated because of the increasing numbers of meat-eaters', while the 'Islamic State narrative justifies the pandemic as a divine retribution to punish China for having brought death to many Uyghur Muslims'. Lorea further observed, 'Feng Shui masters ascribe it instead to a preponderance of the metal and water element over fire in the early year of the Rat' (2020).

While discussing the impacts of the coronavirus on Indigenous groups in Indonesia, Samsul Maarif noticed that the pandemic pushed Indigenous communities onto new digital platforms where they began to discuss and publicly share their religious worldviews and practices with others. 'It was something special for them because their experiences as being an indigenous religion follower were mostly about social exclusion. Their religions were, as far as they could remember, stigmatized as heretical, irrational, primitive or even irreligious' (Maarif 2021: 454-55). Varun Soni, Dean of the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life at the University of Southern California, commented about such dynamics, 'There are a lot of conversations happening within religious circles about how we move communities online... We're seeing an increased interest in accessing these communities, rituals and opportunities for reflection' (USC 2020). This move toward virtual religious engagement, however, has brought its own problems. The spread of conspiratorial and anti-vaxx politics has been decisively promoted through social media technologies whose architects and leaders have been unwilling or unable to reign in the often religion-drenched conspiracy theories, pseudoscience, and anti-vaxx propaganda that has been responsible for untold numbers of deaths and illness. Analyzing COVID-19 as a 'social event' within online media, Benmaghnia Kada asserted that the concept of contagion was an especially powerful frame because 'Contagion is a comprehensive biosocial phenomenon that simultaneously binds the biological, the social, and the symbolic' (2021: 38).

Much of this denial can be traced back to mutually reinforcing religious and political beliefs. This politics of denial—COVIDenial—draws on a range of ideological sources. For some, resistance to coronavirus restrictions and vaccine mandates is rooted in far-right politics and exposure to social media, including QAnon conspiracies. Scholars have noted the ways that changes brought on by a pandemic can prime people to accept conspiratorial beliefs (Mitchell et al. 2020; Albarracín et al. 2022). An April 2021 public religion survey in the U.S., for instance, found that 'only about three in ten Republicans who trust far-right news (32%) or no television news (30%) are vaccine accepters', and the survey found these same individuals are more likely to believe QAnon conspiracy theories (PRRI-IFYC 2021: 7). Bayleigh Elaine Bond and Ryan Neville-Shepard, for further example, have spotlighted the ways that religion, politics, and conspiracy theory have been merging during the pandemic. In a novel way they argued that Trump's initial embrace of vaccine skepticism, QAnon theories, and claims about a rigged election acted, for his devotees, as a kind of 'presidential eschatology' (Bond and

Neville-Shepard 2021). Speaking to these divisions, Doug Livingston concluded that ‘Partisan opinions on vaccines’ have become ‘measurable proxies for who lives and dies’ (Livingston 2021).

For Trump followers such as Angeli, COVIDenial is also grounded in a commitment to New Age healing and alternative medicine, which are viewed as avoiding the evils of ‘Big Pharma’. A cross-national study that focused on science skepticism and vaccine hesitancy found that in the 24 countries surveyed, spirituality and beliefs in alternative medicine played a ‘crucial role...in fostering low faith in science [and] vaccine skepticism’ (Rutjens et al. 2022: 114). Similar New Age spiritualities and the tendency toward skepticism about mainstream medical science was on display in May of 2021, for example, at the Worldwide Freedom Rally held at the popular New Age gathering site in Glastonbury, England (Libre 2021). Jules Evans offered the following colorful description of the event: ‘The worshippers beat their drums and invoked the spirits in their battle against the evils of modern medicine before processing down the main street of Glastonbury, like medieval millenarians during the plague’ (Evans 2021). Discussing such trends in Germany, Miro Dittrich, a researcher at the Berlin-based CeMAS disinformation and conspiracy research center, added that, ‘There is a certain regressive and unscientific worldview that comes from the esoteric corner where alternative cures have long been mainstreamed in a certain Green and lefty nonconformist milieu’, a trend, he notes, that was especially prevalent among ‘middle-class people who trust their feelings more than they trust experts’ (quoted in Bennhold 2022). In India, researchers identified similar dynamics linked to beliefs rooted in Ayurvedic Yoga; gurus such as Baba Ramdev sold all manner of folk remedies, including prescriptions of turmeric and cow urine, claiming they could prevent or cure COVID-19 (Subramaniam 2020).

Indeed, even prior to and apart from the pandemic, research has demonstrated strong links between conspiratorial beliefs, conservative religious views, and support for right-wing, and especially far-right politics (Baker, Perry, and Whitehead 2020; de Beaumont Foundation 2021; Hamel et al. 2021; Lynch, Sturm, and Webster 2021; Sturm and Albrecht 2021; Albarracín et al. 2022). Eric Kurlander has similarly argued that pseudoscience, authoritarianism, and belief in the supernatural went hand in hand in Nazi Germany and are being revived under current pandemic dynamics (Bělíček 2021).

Among political conservatives, COVIDenial tends to be entangled with fundamentalist and ultra-orthodox religious beliefs (Druckman et al. 2021; PRRI 2021; PRRI-IFYC 2021; Upenieks, Ford-Robertson, and Robertson 2021). Druckman and co-authors, for example, found that

'more religious individuals hold significantly fewer correct beliefs' about COVID-19 (Druckman et al. 2021: 650). And a key finding by Upenieks and co-authors was that 'beliefs in an engaged God were indeed associated with greater mistrust in the COVID-19 vaccine' (Upenieks, Ford-Robertson, and Robertson 2021: 20). Moreover, some conservative Jews, Christians, and Muslims have advanced and embraced apocalyptic coronavirus narratives, claiming that the increasing frequency and intensity of fires, floods, and even plagues of locusts are divine punishments, evidence of a rapidly approaching, apocalyptic end of the world (Dein 2020; Ricker 2020; Sharon 2020; Østebø, Tronvoll, and Østebø 2021). As Dein remarks, 'Some Christians claim that COVID-19 is proof that the plagues of the book of Revelation, and in particular the seven Seals of Revelation 6:1–8:1, are occurring now and Jesus' return is imminent. For them, Revelation has indeed predicted the COVID-19 pandemic' (2020: 9). Graeme Lang discusses some of these ultra-orthodox Jewish politics further in this issue. Moreover, Østebø and co-authors describe popular Ethiopian religious beliefs about the April 2020 outbreak of COVID-19 as being 'an expression of God's wrath and his punishment for sin. Consequently, many Ethiopians believed that divine intervention was necessary to prevent the further spread of the virus, and to overcome its devastating impacts' (Østebø, Tronvoll, and Østebø 2021: 339-40).

Such denial is based on belief in a personal God who protects the devout—an assertion that has led many to their deaths, including conservative religious and political figures who made just such assertions or otherwise contested consensus science and the policies based on them (Ali 2021). In extreme cases, religious conservatives who oppose COVID-19 mandates describe their resistance as spiritual warfare against a 'demonic agenda' and 'corrupt shadow governments' that are part of an imagined authoritarian deep state (Strange 2020). 'For many North Americans with Christian backgrounds, the global Covid conspiracy is a literally apocalyptic phenomenon. Agreeing to wear a face mask can amount to wearing the Mark of the Beast from the book of Revelation. The Covid-19 vaccine can contain a microchip branding people with the Mark of the Beast' (Ricker 2020). While Ricker may be overstating the prevalence of such views, there are still many clear links between apocalyptic thinking and the pandemic.

As Simon Dein has observed, 'It is religious fundamentalists who generally associate coronavirus as a sign of end times or a final judgment. But apocalypses can be secular as well as religious' (Dein 2020: 7). Secular apocalyptic narratives vary widely, from ecological collapse and nuclear threats to rogue AI systems. Secular apocalypse narratives provide 'a critique of the philosophy and structure of consumption-based

capitalism', Dein argues, while also calling into question 'old ways of thinking and living' by helping to reveal 'the weaknesses of these structures which prove difficult to see from within' (2020: 10). Whether viewed from a religious or secular perspective, for many, the pandemic has immense revelatory potential—where the deeper political disagreements lie over what, exactly, the pandemic is revealing.

These examples help to illustrate some of the political stakes that follow when a pandemic precipitates or exacerbates social conflict. As religion scholar Mark Juergensmeyer has argued, combining politics and religion can heighten existing social conflicts, and mixing religion with nationalism 'strengthens ties between some while marginalizing others through legislation and public opinion' (Juergensmeyer, Griego, and Soboslai 2015: 21). These dynamics have been evident in 2021 during nationalist rallies and marches across Europe, and in the responses to the pandemic by authoritarian governments such as in Turkey, Russia, and China. Many of the rallies in Europe opposed pandemic restrictions and policies offering support for migrants from other regions, fusing anti-immigrant sentiments with Islamophobic and anti-Semitic discourses (Hafez 2018; Walt 2019; Israel 2021; BBC 2021; Convery 2021).

Arguably, the pandemic has fueled the anti-democratic religious politics promoted by Hindu nationalists advancing a Hindutva political philosophy, whose influence has grown under Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) (Nelson 2021). The BJP, for example, promoted conspiracy theories linking the spread of COVID-19 to Muslims through a #coronajihad hashtag and various pandemic emergency measures that target Muslim communities. A 2020 analysis of the term 'coronajihad' in India by Equality Labs found that the hashtag 'insinuates that Muslims are terrorists, intentionally spreading the virus as an act of bioterrorism. Unleashed by Hindu Nationalists in India via Twitter, this hashtag is now being used globally on all social media platforms' (Soundararajan et al. 2020).

In another example of religious nationalism, a large gathering of Muslims at a 2020 Tablighi Jamaat conference in India faced criminal charges for a COVID-19 super spreader event (Viswanath 2021). Yet a similar response did not occur for Hindu religious events like the Kumbh Mela, which took place in early 2021 in Uttarakhand. The Mela saw an estimated 9 million attendees with minimal social restrictions. At the height of the Mela, cases jumped an astounding 1,800% in Uttarakhand (Ellis-Petersen and Hassan 2021). Ashish Jha, Dean of Brown University's School of Public Health, called the event one of the 'biggest super-spreaders in the history of this pandemic' (quoted in Thapar 2021). Despite the risks from COVID-19, millions of Hindus still chose to

participate in this religious rite. Uttarakhand Chief Minister Tirath Singh Rawat told reporters that a viral surge from the Kumbh Mela was not something devout Hindus needed to worry about because 'faith in God will overcome the fear of the virus' (quoted in Aafaq and Raafi 2021). But conservative West Bengal Imam Maulana Barkati had a different take on who was afforded divine protection from the pandemic in India, suggesting that 'Corona is a threat to Hindus, not to Muslims. The virus has not affected the Muslim localities. We have such blessing of Allah, that we remain unaffected' (quoted in OpIndia 2020).

In Europe and the United States, religious nationalism and political violence have been increasingly fused with a cluster of ideas scholars call white Christian nationalism. Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry describe Christian nationalism as 'a cultural schema' or 'collection of narratives, traditions, myths, value systems, and symbols' which express a 'belief that America is distinctively "Christian", and that this should be reflected in its public policies, sacred symbols, and national identity' (Baker, Perry, and Whitehead 2020: 275). Other researchers have identified two main ideological commitments among white Christian nationalists, 'an antipathy toward racial and ethno-religious minorities such as black Americans, immigrants, and Muslims', and the promotion of an ideology that 'idealizes and advocates a fusion of Christianity and American civic life' (Perry, Whitehead, and Grubbs 2020a: 2). These findings echo what Anthea Butler has described as 'white evangelical racism' (Butler 2021). In concert, a growing body of scholarship has documented links between an ideology of white supremacy, conservative Christianity, and religious violence (Belew 2018; Taylor 2019; Baker, Perry, and Whitehead 2020; Du Mez 2020; Egan and Baldas 2020; Fertl 2020; Perry, Whitehead, and Grubbs 2020b; Butler 2021; Davis and Perry 2021; Perry, Whitehead, and Grubbs 2021). These movements have clearly increased during and likely to some extent because of the pandemic; the evidence in this regard includes the participation of the Oath Keepers in the January 6 Capitol insurrection and in the surge in late 2021 of conservatives attempting to claim religious exemptions from newly imposed vaccine mandates (Jones and Patel 2021).

We think these examples suggest that just as the virus mutates so does religion, triggering diverse cultural and religious responses. These viral mutations will continue to feed on billions of bodies, human and non-human alike, for the foreseeable future, with unvaccinated individuals driving the surge in infections and deaths. The phenomena we have briefly described herein raise difficult questions about how religion shapes and is shaped by the pandemic. The articles assembled in this special issue take us deeply into this troubling cultural terrain.

*Religion and the Pandemic in Focus in this Special Issue*

In 'Religious Responses to a Pandemic: Explanation, Compliance, and Defiance', Graeme Lang launches our special issue with an informative overview exploring the long entanglement of religiosity and pandemics, before providing two case studies of religious responses to the pandemic, by Ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities in the United States and Israel, and Amish communities in North America. Lang shows how cultural insularity and disdain for the secular world and state interventions link these otherwise different groups. These dynamics, Lang argues, comes with a cost, for in both communities COVID-19 infection rates were much higher.

Specifically, Lang observed that opposition to pandemic health restrictions by Orthodox Jews in Israel led to some of the worst outbreaks and highest infection rates. The situation was exacerbated, Lang argues, because Israeli officials ignored violations of quarantines and public health mandates since Ultra-Orthodox Jewish support was key to conservative coalition politics.

Amish and Jewish communities in the United States lacked such dynamics, according to Lang, and consequently, anti-state rhetoric and resistance was less evident. It did not, however, stop Ultra-Orthodox Jews from challenging such rules, with success in overturning pandemic religious restrictions in New York. Among the Amish, Lang further argues, pre-existing relationships between Amish communities and secular society helped explain lower levels of religious resistance to health measures and a greater embrace of COVID-19 health protocols. In response to a shortage of personal-protective equipment (PPE) in hospitals, for example, Amish women used their sewing skills to produce masks and other PPE. For Lang, both cases suggest that to understand the religious responses to the pandemic scholars must pay close attention to regional social and political contexts, not just religious beliefs.

Robin Wright's article 'The "Sparks of *Kuwai*": Baniwa Cosmivision, Covid-19, and the "*Nós Cuidamos*" ["We Care"] Campaign', takes us deep into the Amazon to explore Baniwa responses to the pandemic. His article provides another example of how religious responses to the pandemic are entangled, in this case, with beliefs about COVID-19 as caused by the *Yoopinai* or 'spirit-people', which Baniwa tradition links to *Kuwai*, a powerful shamanic being who is the source of sickness. Wright argues many Baniwa believed COVID-19 began due to transgressions of the original, divine instructions, which violated proper ethical relations between humans and the *Yoopinai* often linked to destructive Amazonian development projects (dams, logging, forest conversion to cow pastures,

and other agricultural pursuits). To achieve spiritual balance, Wright explains, the jaguar shamans deploy ritual incantations and medicinal plants, seeking to remove sickness from the community and restore right relations with the spirit world.

Wright notes, however, the efforts by ritual specialists, including innovative health campaigns led by indigenous Amazonian women, were often insufficient. Many important Baniwa elders died from the coronavirus, including the jaguar shaman Mandu, which led to a major loss of Baniwa cultural knowledge. Wright suggests it is difficult to assess whether Baniwa ritual practices reduced the impact or spread of COVID-19, but he does argue that such ritual practices played an important role in supporting the spiritual and psychological health of the Baniwa. Ultimately, Wright urges scholars to pay closer attention to the interplay of Indigenous understandings of health and sickness, as well as the efficacy of healing rituals and plant medicine, rather than focusing solely on vaccinations.

The next article, 'Religious Debates on the Coronavirus Pandemic in Iran: Examination of their Discourses, Rationales, and Implications', by Satoshi Abe, Saman Jamshidi, and Saeed Rezaei, analyzes Iranian religious responses to the pandemic. They argue that we must examine how religious leaders in Iran variously embraced and rejected scientific understandings of COVID-19. Some Iranian religious figures, such as Abbas Tabrizian, took this argument to the extreme and claimed that only certain Islamic practices would cure people of the virus, claims that the authors argue were based in pseudoscience and questionable readings of Islamic medical texts. Such public figures ultimately faced public sanction and the state's definition of what were proper Islamic health guidelines prevailed. The authors also examined conspiracy theories on the origin of COVID-19 that became widespread, such as claims that foreign 'enemies' (US and Israel) were using the virus as a form of 'psychological warfare' against Iran.

The authors discuss how outbreaks of COVID-19 in the city of Qom pulled Islamic religious leaders into pandemic debates, which were complicated by local political and economic considerations, including whether to keep Qom's mosques open to religious pilgrims and tourists. Views on modern science, they argue, are shaped by Islamic discourses and practices and what officials determined were 'proper' understanding of Islamic doctrine and medicine. The authors concluded that by framing the pandemic as a spiritual crisis, religious leaders promoted Islamic health protocols that strengthened the religious authority of the state, encouraged religious practice, and contributed to the struggle against the pandemic in Iran.

In 'Religion and Biopolitics in the Time of Corona: The Catholic Feast of Corpus Christi in a Polish City', Anna Maćkowiak and Natalia Zawiejska explore the Catholic Church and its relationship to secular, state power in Poland, focusing on the 2020 Corpus Christi festival in Kraków. They argue that through its pandemic responses the Polish state, with the support of the Catholic Church, sought to impose complete control over the population, while also depicting the LGBTQ+ community and women's rights advocates as outside the moral community. This allowed the state to frame such movements more easily as a threat to Polish national identity, understood as heteronormative and firmly anti-abortion. They further contend that the Corpus Christi festival illuminates how the Church's control of urban public spaces was a key to its ability to maintain its power during the pandemic.

A Constitutional Tribunal ruling in late October of 2020 that severely restricted abortion access added to these efforts to consolidate an exclusivist religious nationalism in Poland. Such moves, the authors suggest, added further legitimacy to right-wing attacks against 'gender ideology' and women's rights in Poland. Catholic religious leaders were central to this process of consolidating a specific narrative about Polish national identity hostile to women's rights and LGBTQ+ politics, these researchers argue through an analysis of sermons delivered by Polish Catholic leaders and official political statements. As they note, the use of religiously inflected nationalism in Poland echoed similar processes operating within Christian nationalism elsewhere in Europe as well as in the United States.

Marco Papisidero's 'Miraculous Images and Devotional Practices in Italy at the Time of the COVID-19 Pandemic' also explores the role of the Catholic Church during the pandemic by focusing on the miraculous power of historical images in Italy and how religious objects (crucifixes, paintings, relics, and statues) were integrated into Church rituals. Papisidero argues this was done to implore supernatural helpers associated with the relics to provide protection.

Papisidero notes that belief in the miraculous power of relics, including to ameliorate pandemics, has a long history in Italy, while noting such practices fell by the wayside after the Middle Ages. Pope Francis I and other Church leaders revised these practices during the pandemic, he points out, citing a visit by Pope Francis to the Basilica of Saint Mary Major and the Church of Saint Marcello al Corso as examples. The Basilica houses a Byzantine icon of the Virgin Mary, the *Salus Populi Romani* (Salvation of the Roman people), while the Church houses a fifteenth-century wooden cross that survived a church fire and was used to ward off later pandemics. Both objects were brought to St. Peter's

Square where the Pope, in a live televised ceremony, invoked their miraculous powers to fight the pandemic. Papasidero argues this was an important example of the Catholic Church invoking supernatural powers through religious ritual to fight the coronavirus. Equally important, he claims, the event created a shared sense of religious community through a public ritual in the geographic heart of Catholicism, a ritual that drew on and reinforced, for those watching, the power of miraculous religious objects.

In the final article in our special issue, 'COVID 19 as a Gauge for Secularization? Pandemics, Religious Voices, and Politics in France', Lionel Obadia explores how the French state and its secular politics (*laïcité*) responded to the pandemic by focusing on media discourses. He argues the pandemic created a 'paradoxical situation' in which the French state was forced to balance engagement with religious organizations and a desire to maintain the limits the state has historically imposed on public religions. Religions did not play a key role in either spreading or limiting the impacts of COVID-19 in France, Obadia concludes. With a few exceptions, he argues, religion played a marginal role in French public discourse.

Nevertheless, Obadia describes three main types of religious discourse on the pandemic. The first involved questions over religion's role in the spread of the virus, as highlighted in coverage of a religious gathering in February of 2020 that was an early super spreader event. Negative public reactions to this conclave generated support for stricter restrictions on public religious gatherings. The second discourse surrounded how religious groups discussed the impacts of public health restrictions on religious life. Here the discourse was not religious per se, Obadia argues, but rather included some religiously inflected discourses on how communities across France were coping with changes due to the pandemic. The third and final discourse Obadia explores included references to groups or individuals who were expressing opposition to pandemic restrictions, such as conspiratorial or anti-vaxx political views or 'sectarian' religious ideas, such as Jehovah's Witness beliefs about the end of the world or radical Islamic and Ultra-Orthodox Jewish claims about COVID-19 as divine punishment. Unlike in other countries, Obadia argues, religion had little influence on French society.

The review we provided introducing this special issue, and the studies included here, provide fascinating windows into the responses of religious actors to the pandemic. Of course, religious individuals and groups have often, and still do, consider beneficent or dangerous environments to result from whether people are properly aligned with expectations of a divine being or other spiritual entities or forces (Taylor,

Van Wieren, and Zaleha 2016). Consequently, much of what is apparent in the religious dimensions of the response to COVID-19 coheres with longstanding religious dynamics. The studies exploring religion and this pandemic, however, reveal some fascinating, sometimes encouraging, other times disturbing novelties. These studies are hardly the last word. We hope, nevertheless, that they will contribute to a greater understanding of ways the coronavirus is exercising its own agency as it seeks out and occupies animal bodies, evolving as it moves through them and changing human cultures along its way, adding another chapter in the long process of biocultural evolution, including its religious dimensions.

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