

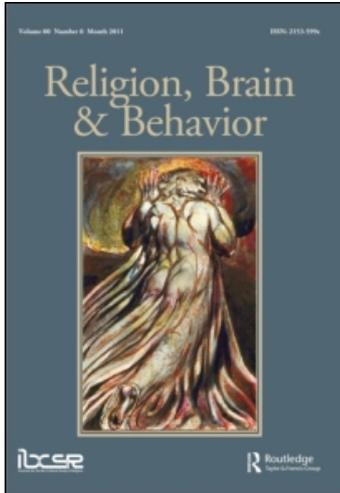
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## Religion, Brain & Behavior

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### Announcing a new journal: *Religion, Brain & Behavior*

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## EDITORIAL

### Announcing a new journal: *Religion, Brain & Behavior*

Religions have been venues for philosophical, theological, moral, and literary reflection for millennia. On occasion in the Medieval West, and decisively since the Renaissance, the cultural idea of religion as a general category has emerged, and with it the basis for identifying and comparing “religious” beliefs and practices. But it was only with the rise of religious studies scholarship in the past 200 years that religion became an object of systematic study in an essentially theologically neutral way. This approach understands “religion” as referring to complex systems of existentially and corporately potent phenomena implicating the social, economic, political, psychological, and neurological aspects of human life, often simultaneously. Religious studies scholars have been philosophers, anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists, economists, cultural critics, and experts in phenomenological analysis, and thus have embraced approaches from both the humanities and the historical and human sciences. This longstanding effort to study religion as a human cultural and psychological phenomenon spurred a tremendous investment in research and has yielded intricate and profound understandings of religious phenomena from all around the world.

Over the past two decades scholars in the historical, cultural, and psychological study of religion have been joined by a new breed of investigators: scientists interested in the biological foundations of religion and the links among its biological, behavioral, and cultural aspects. These scientists include cognitive psychologists, evolutionary anthropologists, cognitive neuroscientists, behavioral economists, and many others. Their aim is more or less the same as the religious studies scholars: to understand religion as a human phenomenon in a theologically neutral way. But these scientific approaches deploy techniques unfamiliar in older forms of the academic study of religion. The combined effort of experts in the scientific study of religion has already yielded a host of new insights and theoretical frameworks for interpreting religious behaviors, beliefs, and experiences. The discoveries of these scientists sometimes complement, and sometimes challenge, established wisdom in religious studies.

Interestingly, it is often ancient puzzles that the new scientific techniques cast in a new light. For example, each of the following questions has persisted in various forms for several millennia, and can be traced in the literature produced within and about religion. Why do people everywhere believe in and venerate supernatural agents? Why are some people more religious than others? How does religion inspire the most fantastic selflessness and the most horrifying violence? Does religion have effects on health? What is the relation of religion to morality? Why does religion so powerfully interact with political systems? How is it that religion acts as a generator of cultural artifacts such as architectural styles and artistic traditions? Why are sacred texts so powerful in some religions? What is the nature of ritual and ritual

sacrifice? Are altered states of consciousness a constant of religious experiences? How do we account for historical trends and transformations in religious traditions?

New light has been shed on these perennial questions, in part, because scientists and scholars have begun to take evolutionary, cognitive, and neuroscientific approaches to religion seriously. Conversely, researchers in these three disciplines have increasingly eschewed simplistic portrayals of religion in favor of more nuanced approaches to the complex phenomena we call religions, learning from the existing wealth of knowledge in the academic study of religion, particularly from historians, anthropologists, and psychologists of religion. The way forward is to synthesize both domains of expertise wherever possible. When experts in the scientific study of religion operate with a lamentable lack of basic knowledge about religious studies, they should be corrected. When scholars in religious studies operate as if relevant scientific knowledge about religion does not exist, they should be challenged. Ultimately, it is the possibility of creatively synthesizing traditional religious studies with new insights from the scientific study of religion that defines the promise of the scientific study of religion.

The new science of religion is developing quickly. Since the late 1980s, when articles in this new domain of scientific research became something more than merely sporadic occurrences, publication has accelerated, with a linear rate of increase. In the two decades from 1988 to 2008, for example, the number of articles of this type in the OneFile Index grew steadily from about 10 per year to over 200 per year, with hints of a trend toward exponential increase in the last few years. In the wider field of science and religion, including the scientific study of religion, the publications rose linearly from about 250 per year to about 1400 per year over the same period. There is clearly a need for a new publishing venue that can centralize research and publication in this field.

In this new journal, *Religion, Brain & Behavior*, we hope to facilitate the growth of this new science of religion and to help bring it to maturity. The scientific study of religion has benefited from its interdisciplinary roots, but this diversity also poses its primary challenge. Research is currently published in many journals in diverse fields, making it nearly impossible for scholars to keep up with, and more importantly, to build upon, each other's work. Despite enormous interest and growth, the field will progress slowly without a journal devoted to publishing groundbreaking biological research on religion. We hope *Religion, Brain & Behavior* will centralize current research in this area and become the flagship journal for evolutionary, cognitive, and neurological studies of religion that integrate findings with established knowledge from the older academic study of religion.

With this aim in mind, *Religion, Brain & Behavior* will unite multiple disciplinary perspectives. The journal seeks empirical and theoretical studies that exhibit both rigorous scientific standards and sophisticated appreciation of the academic study of religion. *Religion, Brain & Behavior* welcomes contributions from a wide array of biological and related disciplines, including evolutionary biology, cognitive science, neurology, genetics, demography, bioeconomics, neuroeconomics, physiology, developmental psychology, evolutionary psychology, evolutionary anthropology, behavioral ecology, archaeology, epidemiology, public health, cultural evolution, and religious studies.

The focus of *Religion, Brain & Behavior* will be to publish high quality cutting-edge empirical research on the biological foundations of religion. Each issue of *Religion, Brain & Behavior* will publish standard research papers as well as case studies – a staple of the neurological literature. Occasionally we will also publish

studies rooted in the humanities that are relevant to advancing the biological study of religion. We will also publish target articles, longer papers that present a summary of a series of data-driven investigations on a major topic in religion and that synthesize this research into a new theoretical account of the issue. These target articles will be accompanied by short commentaries solicited by the editors, and a response by the authors.

Over the next two issues we will be featuring research that has been funded by Justin Barrett's Cognition, Religion, and Theology (CRT) project at Oxford University, supported by the John Templeton Foundation. The CRT project has sought to further the cognitive science of religion by providing training, web resources, and research funding for scholars. The CRT project has supported dozens of scientific studies that promise to yield new evidence regarding how the structures of human minds inform and constrain religious expression, including ideas about gods and spirits, the afterlife, spirit possession, prayer, ritual, religious expertise, and connections between religion and pro-social behavior. In this issue, the articles by Judith Bek and Suzanne Lock, Benjamin Purzycki, and Jeffrey Schloss and Michael Murray were all funded by the CRT project. We thank Justin Barrett and Miguel Farias for their assistance in the editorial processing of these articles.

The sponsoring society of *Religion, Brain & Behavior* is the *Institute for the Biocultural Study of Religion* (IBCSR; see [www.ibcsr.org](http://www.ibcsr.org)). Patrick McNamara and Wesley Wildman are co-founders of the Institute and Richard Sosis, as Senior Research Fellow at the Institute, has a close relationship with it. IBCSR promotes and conducts research at the intersection of culture and the mind, focusing on religious behaviors, beliefs, and experiences. It trains students, scholars, and scientists in the multidisciplinary methods needed to conduct such research effectively and responsibly. IBCSR also disseminates research results (on its website and through the *IBCSR Research Review*) in order to deepen public and scholarly understanding of the culture-mind-brain-religion nexus; to equip experts to resolve conflicts that arise in this area; and to help cultural, political, medical, and religious leaders enhance physical, mental, spiritual, and social wellbeing. Membership in IBCSR brings with it a subscription to *Religion, Brain & Behavior* as well as access to a unique searchable database of articles in the scientific study of religion (the IBCSR Research Review Database), and a number of other benefits.

Religion is complex. No one method, no single approach, no single journal can ever do it justice. *Religion, Brain & Behavior* seeks to take the astonishing complexity of religion seriously and hopes to shed new light on the diversity of religious phenomena by bringing the biological and cognitive sciences into the picture.

The great visionary poet William Blake captured some of the restless, promethean nature of religion in his "Web of Religion" (see cover of this issue). This painting appeared as a plate in his book of visions called *Urizen*. Urizen was the great demiurgic being. As he moved through the "cruel enormities," the "great astonishments," and the "terrifying majesties" of the creations he witnessed, he was both created by and created the "Web of Religion." What is true of Blake's Urizen is true for all of us: we are defined and transformed by what we behold, and we inevitably change what we engage with our restless energies. *Religion, Brain & Behavior* stands for expert engagement with the manifold complexities of religion and responsible transformation of the study of religion as a reliable cultural and biological understanding of religion emerges into view. The journal embodies a vision, not for the future of religion, but for the future of its scientific and scholarly study – a vision of a community of inquiry in which honest

understanding keeps political and religious special interests in check, in which multidisciplinary collaboration overcomes the perpetual tendency toward academic balkanization, and in which religion can be seen for what it is in human life – whatever that may prove to be.

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