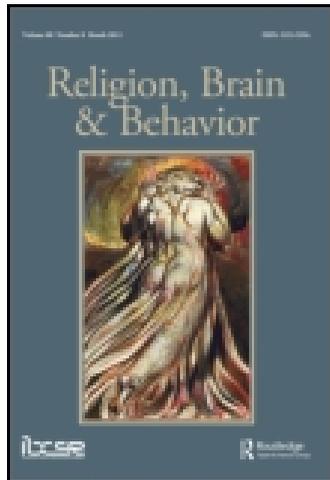


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The Emerging Psychology of Religion

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EDITORIAL

The Emerging Psychology of Religion

This issue of *Religion, Brain & Behavior* features a book symposium on the new edition of the *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*. Edited by Ray Paloutzian and Crystal Park, the *Handbook* is a goldmine of information about the human condition and an important resource for the next generation of students, teachers, and researchers in psychology of religion and spirituality. We are impressed that the first edition of the *Handbook* was published as recently as 2005, and the second edition of 2013, a mere eight years later, is already materially different. This is not just a shift in editorial direction. A process of rapid change is underway and it deserves comment.

Psychology of religion has been developing for well over a century in both the empirically oriented (think William James) and analytically oriented (think Sigmund Freud) forms. The biocultural study of religion sprang to life a mere quarter of a century ago, largely independent of this long heritage of experimental research and theoretical modeling. Few psychologists of religion paid close attention to the new methodological and theoretical approaches emerging from the biocultural study of religion and few exponents of biocultural approaches were deeply engaged with mainstream psychology of religion.

This relative independence was due in part to the fact that cognitive science, neuroscience, religious studies, biological anthropology, and evolutionary theory were more important than psychology of religion in the origins of the biocultural study of religion. With the second edition of the *Handbook*, however, it is clear that psychology of religion is beginning to make fuller use of biocultural methods and perspectives to enhance its already impressive body of knowledge about religion and spirituality. This will require psychology-of-religion researchers to possess multi-level awareness and an ability to integrate multiple disciplinary perspectives, which is a big theme in the *Handbook*, and in harmony with trends in many other domains of psychology.

In the gap between neural networks in brains and cultural products such as religious beliefs and spiritual practices, there is an unrelentingly complex story to be told about human life. Psychologists may have neglected the sociological dimensions of this story, along with its evolutionary dimensions, but they know the middle range of that story—the stretch between brains and groups—extremely well. There is no good way to tell the whole story if we reduce it to social institutions and cultural products, on the one hand, or to neural networks and brain development, on the other hand. All of the levels matter.

If the *Handbook* is a reliable basis for judgment, the emerging psychology of religion aspires to keep all of these layers together. With this intention in place, a reciprocal question becomes pointed: is the biocultural study of religion properly absorbing the formidable insights already accrued in the long history of psychology of religion and spirituality? We have seen biocultural researchers sometimes neglect

religious studies, leading to unrecognizably distorted accounts of religious phenomena. Let's not repeat this error of neglect in relation to the psychology of religion and spirituality.

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