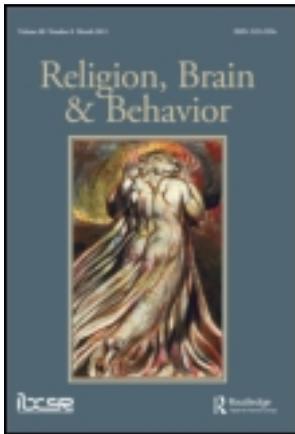


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EDITORIAL

Ethnography and Experiments in the Scientific Study of Religion

Social scientists and religious studies scholars have long recognized religion's ability to strengthen bonds between adherents and create a sense of cohesiveness, or *communitas*, as Turner notably described it. Durkheim observed that religion, or more specifically ritual, transforms individuals into communities. Others have followed suit, elaborating on the collective effervescence that Durkheim described and exploring the emotions and social impacts that result from collective ritual. Still other scholars have emphasized religion's capacity for engendering shared identity, resulting in tightly bounded groups. For nearly a century claims about religious prosociality were supported by descriptive data emerging from historical and ethnographic sources. But over the past decade these data have been complemented by numerous experimental studies aimed at elucidating the mechanisms by which religious beliefs and behaviors foster trust, cooperation, and collective action.

There is probably no topic in the evolutionary study of religion that has received more attention than religious prosociality. This dedicated interest likely stems from a search among evolutionary researchers for plausible adaptive benefits that could outweigh the often significant costs of religious practices. The accumulated data that have been amassed over the past decade, however, have yielded inconsistent results that collectively resist easy interpretations.

In this issue we add to this growing literature. We offer several experimental studies that advance our understanding of the relationship between religion and cooperation, and yet, similar to previous work, findings are not consistent across studies. The first two studies focus on synchrony, which following Wiltermuth and Heath's now classic study of synchrony and cooperation (*Psychological Science*, 2009) has received considerable attention among scientists studying religion. Reddish, Bulbulia, and Fischer report on two experiments that show how the prosocial effects of synchrony can extend beyond group boundaries to non-performers of synchronous actions. This is a significant finding that poses a challenge to theories that describe religious prosociality as limited to in-group members. Cohen, Murdy, and Kirschner, on the other hand, report on experiments that found no independent prosocial effects of synchrony. Rather, prosocial effects in their data result from religious narrative priming. Both of these studies make important contributions to the growing database on synchrony and cooperation, and their results highlight the need for additional experimental work that can elucidate the social effects of synchronous behaviors and tease apart the mechanisms underlying these effects.

Also in this issue, David Rand and colleagues explore the effects of reading passages from sacred texts on cooperation. This study developed out of an unlikely but fascinating collaboration between two leaders in their respective academic fields: Sarah Coakley, a theologian who delivered the 2012 Gifford Lectures, and Martin Nowak, a theoretical and evolutionary biologist whose work has transformed our understanding of the evolution of

cooperation. Their unique collaboration resulted in a Harvard University Press edited volume, *Evolution, Games, and God* (2012). Here, with David Rand and other members of Nowak's lab, they report that Biblical passages increased prosociality among Christians in two different experimental settings, but similar effects were not found among Hindus who read a passage from the S'rîmad Bhâgavatam. Moreover, none of the religious passages had prosocial effects on readers who were not members of the religion from which the passages were derived.

In this issue we also offer a book symposium on Tanya Luhrmann's extraordinary ethnography of Evangelicals entitled *When God Talks Back*. Luhrmann's ethnography is a useful reminder that many contemporary religions are not primarily concerned with forming cohesive groups. While Luhrmann does describe tightknit Evangelical communities in Chicago and California, the bulk of her research meticulously details how Evangelical practices are individual spiritual techniques that share resemblances with psychotherapy. And while scripture may elicit cooperation among Christians, as Rand et al.'s results suggest, scripture is most commonly embraced by Evangelicals as a source of meaning and inspiration.

Luhrmann also reminds us of how experimental work and ethnography complement each other, or more accurately in her case, the benefit of supplementing years of ethnographic work with controlled experiments. We believe that this multi-method approach is the most promising way forward for our field. Experiments are essential for rigorously testing theories of religious cognition and behavior, but religion is not lived in the lab. Both experiments and ethnography are needed, and Luhrmann provides an exemplary model for how to pursue this multi-method approach. We are encouraged by the recent development and success of several large multi-method cross-cultural projects, such as Ted Slingerland's Cultural Evolution of Religion Research Consortium (University of British Columbia) and Harvey Whitehouse's Ritual, Community, and Conflict project (Oxford University), which suggests that multi-method research is indeed the direction in which the biocultural study of religion is headed. This is particularly fortunate as we suspect it offers the best chance of unraveling the puzzle of religious prosociality.

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