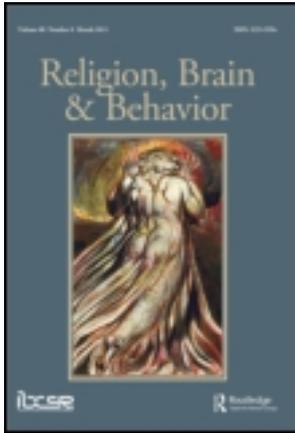


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### The politics of field names

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## EDITORIAL

### The politics of field names

#### Introduction

Most scientific research fields have covert or overt policing activities to handle boundary monitoring, quality assurance, and naming conventions. The field to which *Religion, Brain & Behavior* (RBB) makes its scientific contribution is no different in this regard, except that the field is young, it is moving fast and so is slightly disorganized, and it does not yet have a universally accepted name. Greater consensus around the use of names would help us avoid speaking past one another, and might help keep the ideologically loaded battles around naming to a tolerable minimum. With this in mind, we present here a survey of the basic issues surrounding the naming of fields and subfields.

#### Locating the scientific study of religion

The use of the sciences (social sciences, psychological sciences, medical sciences, natural sciences, etc.) to study religion constitutes one notable approach within the *academic study of religion*. The academic study of religion also boasts humanistic approaches (literary, philosophical, ethical, comparative, etc.) and historical approaches. In fact, historical approaches are sometimes classified with social scientific approaches and sometimes with humanistic approaches, and historians sometimes express strong preferences for one or the other identification. But that doesn't matter much because the field of history boasts a well-established set of protocols for managing and interpreting evidence, and it is among the more methodologically secure academic fields – it is certainly better organized than the scientific study of religion.

The academic study of religion intends to signal an important distinction bearing on institutional locations and obligations. Many religious institutions internally support forms of inquiry that serve the particular interests prevalent within those venues. For example, most religious institutions support inquiry into their sacred texts *as sacred*, their history of doctrine *as intrinsically valuable*, and their ritual practices *as living forms of communal exchange*. They train professional leaders and equip them with knowledge of the intricacies of doctrine and practice that perpetuate the institution and may even increase its market share within retail religion. These specialized forms of inquiry – even when they are rigorous and critically aware of alternatives – are conducted within the ambit of the institutional interests of the religious group that sponsors and inspires them. Such forms of inquiry are just as vital for producing excellence in religious leadership as good legal training is vital for producing excellent professional legal practitioners. Nevertheless, the religious institutional location imposes quite specific obligations on inquirers and typically requires (or at least strongly encourages) the adoption of certain presuppositions to

frame inquiry – for example, that the sacred texts are *actually sacred*, that God *actually exists*, that enlightenment is *actually achievable*, or that the religious tradition in question is *actually valuable*.

By contrast, the institutional home of the academic study of religion is the secular academy. Ideas taken for granted in the pursuit of self-understanding within religious institutions are up for grabs in the secular academy because its morality of inquiry is all about advancing knowledge, regardless of its implications for any human institution, group, or individual. The secular academy's pursuit of objectivity is notoriously controverted but there is no question that it aims for objectivity and does better in achieving objectivity because of the effort to do so. Incentives are organized around this morality of inquiry, regardless of the discipline, with reputations, honors, and remuneration geared into achievements depending in part on conformity to this morality of inquiry. It is the pursuit of the goals of the secular academy that distinguishes the academic study of religion from intellectual inquiry supported by religious institutions.

The extraordinary complexity of religion as a web of psychological, social, economic, and political phenomena means that the academic study of religion naturally forms alliances with other academic disciplines as they promise to shed light on those phenomena. Historically, these alliances arose at different times, depending on when those disciplines became sufficiently sensitive to engage religious phenomena meaningfully. Philosophy, literature, and history arrived first, during the Renaissance and Enlightenment. Next were the human sciences – sociology, psychology, anthropology, political economy – in the nineteenth century. The physical sciences – evolutionary biology, neurology, medicine – arrived most recently, in the last few decades of the twentieth century, with an explosion of research publications beginning around 1990. The staggered arrival of disciplinary alliances has meant that the academic study of religion, once dominated by philosophy and history, has for some decades been dominated by the social sciences and history. Whether the biological sciences can become a more clearly recognized presence within the academic study of religion remains to be seen.

### **Broadening the scientific study of religion**

The name “scientific study of religion” is appealing because it straightforwardly indicates the academic home and purpose of the associated research endeavors. But these days the name is not without controversy. The social sciences claimed the name for the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion (founded in 1949) and its journal, the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (founded in 1961). At the time there was no competition for the designation “scientific study of religion” because most psychologists studying religion were humanists and analysts rather than empirical researchers, and they were content with their own societies and journals (the American Psychological Association was founded in 1892; and its strictly non-sectarian Division 36, the Society for the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality, was founded in 1976, with roots in older organizations running back to 1946). Since that time, however, many claimants for the same name have emerged – particularly empirical psychologists, cognitive scientists, neuroscientists, and medical researchers.

It is at this point that the politics of naming becomes a significant consideration. The entry of the so-called “hard” sciences (biology, neurology, medicine, etc.) into a domain dominated by the so-called “soft” sciences (sociology, psychology, history, etc.)

says it all: nobody likes to be told that their scientific research is “soft” (with overtones of flabby, easy, questionable, inferior, biased, weak, etc.) relative to someone else’s “hard” research (with overtones of toned, difficult, serious, superior, unbiased, strong, etc.). Moreover, generally speaking, the hard sciences control more research funding and confer more prestige than the soft sciences. Thus, those in control of the academic study of religion are typically reluctant to welcome the biological sciences with open arms, and those controlling the name “scientific study of religion” are not likely meekly to surrender it to biologists, cognitive scientists, and neurologists, or even to broaden it to include biological approaches. But the broadening of the scientific study of religion to include biological approaches is inevitable; biology, cognitive science, and neurology are uncontroversially sciences, after all, and even sociologists are increasingly incorporating biological approaches (Robert Bellah, notably).

Broadening the scope of the scientific study of religion to incorporate biological approaches is more conciliatory than it may seem at first glance. RBB, and the scientific research institute that sponsors it (Institute for the Bio-Cultural Study of Religion, [www.ibcsr.org](http://www.ibcsr.org)), stand for the harmonization and mutual cooperation of all relevant sciences – hard, soft, and everything in between – in the task of constructing a thorough scientific understanding of the complex web of religious phenomena. We are not recommending the theft from the social sciences or surrender by the social sciences of the precious designation “scientific study of religion.” Rather, we use the term in its natural sense as inclusive of the sciences of cognition and culture, which stretch from evolutionary biology and neurology, through empirical psychology and sociology, to history and cultural studies. So long as the disciplinary approach is an empirical and scientific one, and so long as the discipline has something valuable to say about religion, that discipline belongs in the field of the *scientific study of religion*.

### **Within the scientific study of religion**

Within the scientific study of religion, understood in this broadened sense, there are two emerging subfields developing alongside the older social scientific study of religion. Both subfields are grappling with their own naming issues.

On the one side, medical researchers are trying to figure out how to describe their empirical investigations into the physical and mental health effects of religious and spiritual beliefs, behaviors, experiences, and corporate participation. The phrase “spirituality and health” has been used in some circles but its success as the name of a popular magazine founded in the late 1990s by T. George Harris (former editor of *Psychology Today*) has made it less suitable to designate the scientific research field. Following the lead of Duke University’s Center for Spirituality, Theology, and Health would be a move in the wrong direction, despite the popularity of practical applications of such research in religious community settings. The massive Spirituality, Medicine, and Health Bibliography Project (see <http://people.bu.edu/wwildman/smhbib/>) suggests another name for the field as a whole. Those laboring in that subfield of the scientific study of religion will have to figure out what to call their work.

On the other side – and this is where RBB belongs – the biological sciences have produced a disciplinarily diverse host of contributions to the scientific study of religion. For example, RBB publishes research in evolutionary biology, cognitive science, neurology, genetics, demography, bioeconomics, neuroeconomics, physiology,

developmental psychology, evolutionary psychology, evolutionary anthropology, behavioral ecology, archaeology, epidemiology, public health, cultural evolution, artificial societies, social simulation, and religious studies. How should this welter of disciplinary approaches be collectively named? RBB does not endorse a name for the whole – its title deftly avoids this controverted issue – but there are many names employed. One popular option is *cognitive science of religion*, with the International Association for the Cognitive Science of Religion leading the charge. Alternative names – bio-cultural sciences of religion, evolutionary religious studies, cognitive and evolutionary science of religion – exist and none is ideal.

The subfield within the scientific study of religion to which RBB contributes may not have a universally accepted name, but we do know what we are doing. We are incorporating the full range of disciplines involved in understanding the formidably complex network of causal linkages running in both directions between biological and cultural factors in religious beliefs, behaviors, and experiences.

Whatever names are finally used, the modes of research represented in the three major subfields of the scientific study of religion are not going anywhere, and it is imperative that they cooperate if we are to deliver on the revolutionary promise of the scientific study of religion.

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