



The scientific study of religion and the humanities

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EDITORIAL

The scientific study of religion and the humanities

The tremendous growth in the scientific study of religion during the last two decades has meant that scientists have finally begun to engage seriously with works on religion produced by humanities scholars – but that engagement has only just begun. Indeed, natural scientists (especially neurologists, cognitive scientists, evolutionary psychologists, anthropologists, and biologists) have been forcing their way into territory formerly claimed as the exclusive domain of the humanities and the social sciences. A profusion of new theories about the origins and functions of religion has appeared, many of them with stronger empirical credentials than most of the theories of religion that have dominated academic attention in the past. Scholarly understanding of religion is deepening and broadening rapidly and the future of its academic and scientific study has never been more exciting.

Religion departments in colleges and universities around the world see this revolution in a variety of ways. Some are in the vanguard, looking to hire faculty who are capable of leading the field. Others are unaware of the revolution, their leaders not even knowledgeable enough to be embarrassed by the departmental deficit. Many are somewhere in between, gradually realizing the importance of these new approaches to the academic study of religion but not yet ready to recruit expert researchers and not at all sure of how their curriculum should respond.

Religion, Brain & Behavior endeavors to support mutual interaction between the traditional academic study of religion and emerging trajectories of research within the scientific study of religion. We believe that both sides stand to benefit. On the one hand, the academic study of religion benefits by the discovery of new ways of interpreting the origins and functions of religion. These discoveries and theories can then be coordinated with what is already known, with all of the adjustments and negotiations that such coordination involves. On the other hand, the scientific study of religion benefits from mutual interaction especially by appropriating hard-won insights from the academic study of religion. These insights inspire the recognition of extreme variety in forms of religious expression, the cognitive and functional complexity of religious belief, and the difficulty of achieving a clear definition of religion.

The value of the academic study of religion is, we believe, too often underappreciated by many working within the scientific study of religion. It is dismayingly common to see naive formulations of religion in scientific studies – simplistic formulations that make even beginners in the academic study of religion cringe. Researchers in the scientific study of religion do not have to reinvent the wheel, and they should not suppose that a sophisticated understanding of religion is a trivial matter that they can achieve merely by relying on intuition. Indeed, the academic study of religion has shown repeatedly that the intuitions even of trained scholars of religion have often led to deep mistakes of interpretation. Novice interpreters, then, are especially vulnerable to elementary errors.

Religion, Brain & Behavior promotes interaction between the academic study of religion and the scientific study of religion in three ways. First, we expect papers submitted for review to exhibit basic standards of sophistication in the interpretation of religion and religious phenomena. Second, we include humanists in our editorial advisory board and among our editors in order to keep alive awareness of the opportunities and dangers associated with this two-way interaction. Third, we occasionally publish papers in the scientific study of religion that emphasize the humanities to illustrate the benefits of the academic study of religion for the scientific study of religion. For example, in this issue, Rolf Reber and Edward Slingerland reflect on the value of the cognitive science of religion for understanding some aspects of Chinese religion, and they do so by combining the expertise of the cognitive psychologist (Reber) and the sensibilities of the humanist scholar of religion (Slingerland). We also see in this issue philosopher-theologian LeRon Shults reviewing recent books in the sciences of cognition and culture with an eye to their relevance for interpreting the *meaning* and *value* of religious beliefs and practices – traditional venues of debate for humanists that would normally lie beyond the purview of scientific research.

Just as we encourage natural scientists to adopt an appropriately complicated perspective on religion, we encourage humanities scholars to learn some of the methodologies, analytical tools, and theoretical perspectives of the relevant natural sciences so that the field can build a cadre of natural scientists and religion scholars who establish long-term and mutually rewarding collaborations. These sorts of collaborations can only raise the level of methodological rigor and deepen the insights of the emerging science of religion.

Religion, Brain & Behavior is first and foremost a scientific journal. But scientific work depends on accurate knowledge of the object of study, and for that the scientific study of religion must rely on, and display more than a passing familiarity with, the traditional academic study of religion.

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