



## Hilbert Problems in the scientific study of religion

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## Hilbert Problems in the scientific study of religion

In the course of their development, all academic fields benefit from moments in which researchers take stock of what they have accomplished and identify important questions on the horizon. In 1900, David Hilbert presented ten fundamental questions to the *International Congress of Mathematicians* in Paris, outlining what he took to be the big unresolved questions of his discipline. Hilbert's list expanded to twenty-three questions, and subsequently focused the minds of twentieth-century mathematicians.

In the final issue of 2015, we published an editorial inviting scholars to submit “what they take to be the most pressing Hilbert Problem in the study of religion” (Bulbulia et al., 2015, p. 264). We asked that submissions be brief, around one thousand words, and address a fundamental question that is profoundly relevant to the scientific study of religion. The theoretical implications of an answer, we indicated, must be capable of reconfiguring how scholars understand religion. We further instructed authors to describe clear methods for addressing the questions they propose.

We ultimately received over 30 submissions. In order for the submissions to be evaluated by scholarly experts in a fair manner, we contacted members of our editorial board who had not submitted a Hilbert Problem and asked them to evaluate 5–7 submissions each. We thank those editorial board members who were able to participate in this evaluation process. Each submission was reviewed by a minimum of three board members. The review process was double-blind. We asked our board members to rate each submission according to four criteria:

- Clarity: Is the problem stated clearly?
- Importance: Is pursuing this question capable of reconfiguring how scholars understand religion?
- Relevance: Is the question relevant to religion as a human phenomenon?
- Method: Is a plan for addressing the question indicated?

Based on the evaluations of our participating editorial board members, 17 submissions were accepted for publication. We are delighted to publish these Hilbert Problems in this special issue. As will be evident, the Hilbert Problem articles vary widely in topic and style. Topics include issues of religious belief, fertility, health, experience, morality, theology, violence, and prosociality, among others. Moreover, some of the articles address fundamental issues in the scientific study of religion, whereas others explore applied issues.

Following the review process of the Hilbert Problem articles, we invited diverse scholars of religion to write commentaries on these articles. We asked commentators to reflect on what the publication of these Hilbert Problems means for the scientific study of religion. We are pleased to publish eight commentaries in this issue. These commentaries not only assess the merits of the published Hilbert Problems, but they also offer candid assessments of the current state of our field. As is clear from commentator remarks, there has been much progress in the bio-cultural study of religion over the past decade, but fundamental problems remain and there is considerably more to be accomplished. Overall, despite genuine concerns, there is clearly a sense of optimism about the direction and future of the field.

One of our goals in publishing this special issue was to encourage productive research. We cannot help but wonder how many of *RBB*'s Hilbert Problems will be solved during the next century.

We hope readers inspired to solve a Hilbert Problem in the study of religion will consider publishing their results with *RBB*.

We are aware there are many important questions for the bio-cultural study of religion that have not been raised in this issue. Just as the mathematics of the twentieth-century was not constrained to Hilbert's list of twenty-three questions, so too should the bio-cultural study of religion continue to operate well beyond the scope of *RBB*'s Hilbert Problems. Indeed, if our field remains healthy, vibrant, and productive, we should expect that many questions will emerge that are obscured by the state of present knowledge, which we cannot possibly foresee in advance.

In closing, we would like to express our sincere gratitude to everyone who has participated in the process of putting this special issue together, which has opened up such fascinating questions about the still poorly understood religious dimensions of the human condition.

## Reference

Bulbulia, J., Wildman, W. J., Sosis, R., & Spezio, M. L. (2015). What are "The Hilbert Problems" in the Study of Religion? *Religion, Brain & Behavior*, 5, 263–265. doi:10.1080/2153599X.2015.1084470

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