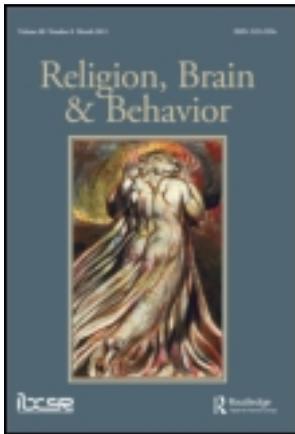


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EDITORIAL

The Scientific Study of Religion

What is the best name for the subject matter of *Religion, Brain & Behavior*? The answer is obvious: the scientific study of religion.

Consider the sciences employed to study religion in research articles published in the current issue. Hoverd et al. employ the social sciences and economic theory to evaluate “deprivation theory”; McKay et al. use social psychology to identify the factors that optimize pro-social behavior among Catholics; Acosta et al. work out of an evolutionary cognitive neuroscience framework to explain a bias in the artistic presentation of religiously significant faces; Sibley et al. show how careful use of demographic data can yield sophisticated and robust predictions of religious populations in the future; Laor analyzes processes leading to cultural uniformity related to religion using an evolutionarily informed cultural studies approach; and Rottman reviews Barrett’s *Born Believers*, operating within cognitive neuroscience and developmental psychology.

Brain sciences, psychological sciences, social sciences, biological sciences—it is a rich representation of the entire range of sciences with something important to say about human life, and thus about religion. So “scientific study of religion” has to be the right name. But there is a problem: the way the phrase has been used in the last half century is narrower than this.

Because of the well-earned success of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, the phrase has become associated with the social sciences, cultural anthropology, and demographics more than with human evolution, cognitive neuroscience, or psychology. The process is understandable. The American Psychological Association has been going strong since 1892, and several of its 54 divisions and many of its 134,000 members have research interests in religion; much the same is true of other national and regional organizations of psychological researchers. When representatives of the social sciences who study religion got organized in 1949, the name “scientific study of religion” was available, and the psychologists of religion were already doing their own thing, so it made sense to employ the phrase to name their society.

Cognitive neuroscience and evolutionary approaches to religion only began picking up steam in the 1980s. By that time both the psychological and social sciences in relation to religion were well established. The recently formed International Society for the Cognitive Science of Religion resolved the naming problem in one way: by focusing on cognitive science, even though in practice its disciplinary coverage is much broader. The Institute for the Bio-Cultural Study of Religion resolved the naming problem in another way: by using the under-utilized hybrid “bio-cultural” to indicate a focus on research that links the biological and cultural aspects of human life.

What is needed, and what we are predicting, is two separate revolutions within the psychological sciences and the social sciences. Psychologists studying religion will

increasingly realize that we can't get very far in understanding human beings without the biological and evolutionary sciences. Sociologists and anthropologists studying religion will gradually come to see that the biological and evolutionary aspects of religion are vital for making sense of social dynamics and cultural phenomena. Indeed, both processes of transformation have begun—witness, for example, the success of the sessions on biological and evolutionary aspects of religion in recent annual meetings of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion.

It will happen in fits and starts but territorial attitudes and historical anomalies regarding names self-correct in the end. Eventually we will all be doing the scientific study of religion, together.

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