



Religion and Emotion

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To cite this article: Michael L. Spezio, Wesley J. Wildman, Richard Sosis & Joseph Bulbulia (2016) Religion and Emotion, Religion, Brain & Behavior, 6:3, 185-187, DOI: 10.1080/2153599X.2016.1204127

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/2153599X.2016.1204127>



Published online: 11 Jul 2016.



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EDITORIAL

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A year ago, in issue 5.3, this space alerted readers and prospective authors to new standards of rigor in the practice of inquiry and reporting for neuroimaging approaches in social, cognitive, and affective neuroscience (SCAN; Spezio, Bulbulia, Wildman, & Sosis, 2015). Sketches of simple guidelines and accompanying examples provided good evidence for the promise of SCAN for the study of religion, along with cautions about relying on older models and former standards of inference and statistical reporting. One area of recent research into religion that may seem to be an obvious choice for further refinement of theories and methods in affective neuroscience is the interdisciplinary inquiry into religion and emotion. Yet this has to date not been the case, even taking the most recent work into account.

One reason for the relatively minimal engagement of affective neuroscience by the study of religion and emotion is because the study of religion and emotion is nearly as varied as the study of religion itself. The many varieties include influential approaches from the humanities and social theory expressing deep suspicion, sometimes even hostility, toward any scholarly inquiry suggesting that at least some aspects of religion are not wholly reliant on language and may transcend cultural context and specificity. Another reason for the difficulty of engagement is that affective neuroscience has historically marginalized ethological, anthropological, and philosophical approaches that stress contextual and cultural influences. Affective neuroscience has often emphasized affective averaging and an unreflective positivism. It has paid scant attention to evolutionary lessons from paleoanthropology, despite its numerous claims to links with Darwin's famous *The Expression of Emotion in Man and Animals* (1872). And until very recently, it has been insensitive to individual, developmental, and cultural differences, as well as interspecies differences that ethologists have worked so hard to elucidate. Are these obstacles to engagement and understanding surmountable?

Recent research suggests that they are, at least in part. Yet the main challenge to creating more generative, inter- and transdisciplinary programs of research into religion and emotion remains the fact that, for the most part, the methods on which each perspective's claims depend are known only by the experts in that perspective. Affective neuroscientists do not commonly engage with books on affect theory, the affective turn, cultural and paleoanthropologies of affect, and philosophies of affect/emotion. Most programs that train affective neuroscientists do not explicitly address the history of emotion as a relatively recent invention, nor do they take stock of the field's dependence on the West's long history of dualism and oppositionalism with regard to affects and cognitions.

On the other hand, affective theorists in the humanities and social theory do not always cite or build their arguments on peer-reviewed, scientific research papers. On occasion these scholars have engaged popular accounts of science, such as trade books written by influential scientists, but that is not the same as reading original research articles. Published journal articles are obviously much more nuanced and detailed than the popular accounts, and this is the literature that scientists themselves read and use.

All of this means that the central claims and methods and the careful argument and evidence used to support the claims derived from those methods are going unexplored, precisely when the aims are to explore them, critique them, refute them, or develop them, all for the purposes of improved interdisciplinary understanding. As the readers of and contributors to this journal know, the problematics of religion and emotion are too complex for a single discipline or division of disciplines. The journal itself and its rootedness in a biopsychosocial model of inquiry help to illustrate this view.

Thankfully, there are a number of scholars whose past and ongoing work illustrate potential for productive advance in the understanding of religion and emotion. John Corrigan's careful work dates back several decades and the Oxford handbook that he edited continues to guide work in the area, as does early work by Thandeka. In 2008, at the American Academy of Religion (AAR) meeting in Chicago, Thandeka, along with Nina Azari, led an exploratory panel (A2-129), sponsored by the Science, Religion and Technology Group and the then-consultation on the Cognitive Science of Religion. The topic was, "Affect: A Link Between Religious Studies and Affective Neuroscience." That panel included luminaries in religion such as John B. Cobb and William A. Graham, who was at the time Dean of the Harvard Divinity School. Since John Cobb himself was unable to be present, Philip Clayton kindly stepped in to read Cobb's paper and made several insightful remarks during discussion. William Graham was hopeful about and welcomed a future incorporation of affective science into the study of religion, to more closely inquire into individual experiences in religious practices, and their reciprocal relationship with social and cultural influences. The panel explicitly invited perspectives from social and affective neuroscience and wrestled with how best to connect them to rigorous work in religious studies. It was not until the 2012 AAR, again in Chicago, that another exploratory group led by Donovan Schaefer, M. Gail Hammer, Abigail Kluchin, and Jenna Supp-Montgomerie held a panel (A18-330) on the topic of, "The Affective Turn in Religious Studies." That exploratory session was the beginning of the AAR Religion, Affect, and Emotion Group, which led a 2013 AAR session (A25-239) on the topic of, "Mapping the Affective Turn in Religious Studies." Both the 2012 and 2013 sessions focused wholly on the humanities and social theory, emphasizing priority of the affective over language and cognition in religion. Illustrative of the above-noted challenges to more interdisciplinary study of religion and emotion, these two panels reinscribed a kind of oppositionalism or at least dualism when conceptualizing affect and cognition, and neither of them invited engagement with affective neuroscience or other affective sciences.

Donovan O. Schaefer's (2015) recent book, *Religious Affects: Animality, Evolution, and Power*, builds on the anti-linguistic project using an oppositionalist/dualist framework, prioritizing affect over cognition. At the same time, he invites stronger engagement with evolutionary, physiological, and neuroscientific perspectives. Again illustrating the challenges outlined here, affective neuroscience is portrayed as mandating an intransigent view of emotion rather than a nuanced view of emotion's neural plasticity and encoding that includes individual, social, and cultural plasticity. That is understandable given the sourcing of the claims about intransigence, which are secondary sources of two influential, popular accounts from affective neuroscientists.

By contrast, in recent peer-reviewed literature of affective neuroscience, there is an emerging awareness that emotion is not neurally encoded in the same manner as are basic sensations such as pain, brightness, loudness, etc. Rather, emotion's encoding in neural systems appears more like encoding models for cognitive functions such as complex object perception and memory. In other words, the pattern of neural activation of one participant experiencing an emotion does not confer upon a scientist the ability to

classify a similar emotion in another participant based on the presence of a similar pattern. These inter-individual differences are even more pronounced across developmental, social, and cultural histories, leading to an understanding of the broad plasticity of emotion, at least in relation to the neural networks contributing to it.

Affective neuroscience will continue to take up an emphasis on diverse histories and on their political structure and dynamics, in part via serious engagement of the affective turn in the study of religion. Schaefer's book and the inquiries by members of the AAR's Religion, Affect, and Emotion Group have much to contribute to a study of religion and emotion that takes both embodiment and historical difference seriously. Conversely, affective neuroscience has much to contribute to this effort as well, especially if the field moves beyond the theoretical containment of the average brain and recognizes the sociopolitical containments of the persons and bodies it studies, and of its own theories. This mutual movement on the part of both affective theorists and affective scientists is critical to understanding, for example, the power of nascent and established practices to form groups, coalitions, societies, memories, concepts, and beliefs, both serving cooperative and conflictual roles in human history, development, and evolution. RBB continues to advocate for creative exploration of such scholarly exchange in the service of greater understanding.

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