Introducing a special issue on phase two of the Evolution of Religion and Morality project

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EDITORIAL

Introducing a special issue on phase two of the Evolution of Religion and Morality project

This special double issue, *Religion, Brain & Behavior*'s first ever double issue, presents results from the second phase of the Evolution of Religion and Morality (ERM) project. Results from the first phase of this pioneering and influential project were published in a previous special issue of *RBB* (2018, volume 8, issue 2) and elsewhere (e.g., Purzycki et al., 2016). The core of this second wave of research employs experimental games—the Dictator Game and Random Allocation Game—as well as demographic and economic data to explore the relationship between beliefs in particular types of supernatural agents and cooperative behavior.

Similar to the previous *RBB* special issue on the ERM project, this issue presents independent articles on each of the field sites from the project. These articles allowed the ERM researchers to describe the cultural and historical context of their field studies, and offered an opportunity to conduct more rigorous intra-field site analyses in ways that were not possible in the synthetic cross-cultural study previously published with the second-wave data (Lang et al., 2019). Each of these studies explores ethnographically-derived questions that afford rich insights about the subsistence, ecological, and economic variation in the collective ERM data set.

In addition to these experimental and interview studies, this issue also offers four new synthetic pieces. First, Baimel et al. analyze the relationship between religious commitments and material insecurity. They show that across the 15 ERM field sites, Christian sites exhibit the strongest relationship between religious commitment and belief in a moralizing god, and this relationship is positively predicted by material insecurity. Second, Vardy et al. use the collective ERM data set to explore the oft-cited gender gap in which women exhibit higher levels of religious commitment than men. Consistent with previous research, the ERM findings support a religious gender gap. However, this gap only arises for traditions with a moralizing god. Women do not exhibit greater religious commitments in traditions that worship local gods. Third, Purzycki et al. assess whether the supernatural agents that elicit commitments across the 15 field sites are interested in human morality. As anticipated, even when "official" or "theologically correct" claims deny that the gods maintain moral interest, across the ERM field sites study participants inferred that their gods, even local gods, were generally interested in their moral actions.

In the final paper of this special issue, Purzycki et al. wrap up the 10-year ERM project with a summary target article that examines the methodological and analytic challenges of a large multi-field site cross-disciplinary study. This article assesses the strengths and limitations of both phases of the ERM project, as well as offers advice for researchers aiming to pursue similarly ambitious projects. It provides a rare glimpse into the behind-the-scenes machinations of a long-term large-scale research endeavor. We elicited commentaries from five well-known scholars in the scientific study of religion—from anthropology, cognitive science, philosophy, and psychology—to comment on this article and the ERM project in general. The special issue concludes with a response to these commentaries from Purzycki et al.

The impact of ERM on the biocultural study of religion in particular, and the academic study of religion in general, is only just beginning. In addition to the various scholarly debates that their results have initiated, ERM has strengthened a trend toward cross-cultural projects aimed at understanding variation in religious expression, commitment, and behavior. Indeed, the scientific study

of religion seems to be moving into a new phase in which large multi-field site studies are not only the gold standard for evaluating cognitive and evolutionary hypotheses about religion, but they are becoming the baseline standard through which biocultural theories of religion are rigorously vetted. For example, recent cross-cultural multi-site projects include Tanya Luhrmann's Mind and Spirit project (Luhrmann et al., 2021), John Shaver's Evolutionary Dynamics of Religion, Family Size, and Child Success project (Shaver et al., 2020; Spake et al., 2021), and Lois Lee's Understanding Unbelief project (Bullivant et al., 2019). Looking ahead, the Global Flourishing Study at Harvard University's Human Flourishing Program and Baylor's Institute for Studies of Religion will collect data from 240,000 participants across 22 countries for at least five years to investigate the interplay of religion, meaning-making, volunteering, psychological well-being, and physical health (https:// hfh.fas.harvard.edu/global-flourishing-study?admin_panel = 1). In a previous *RBB* editorial, we argued that rigorous causal methods are vital for progress in empirical research (Bulbulia et al., 2021). The Harvard/Baylor Global Flourishing Study is especially promising because it has been designed from the ground up to implement such causal methods (VanderWeele et al., 2020). The Global Flourishing Study has also been designed to disentangle within-country variation across global cultures. This feature will allow researchers to distinguish universal from particular qualities in religion. Our excitement, however, is tempered by an appreciation of the challenges in cross-cultural data collection, which Purzycki et al. describe in this issue. Even the best-made plans go awry. And we note that critical scholars have already raised various concerns about this study, such as the study's underlying moral and psychological assumptions, gaps between what qualitative and quantitative research can uncover, and the structural health inequalities that are unlikely to be adequately captured in the Global Flourishing Study, even though such inequalities have historically limited human flourishing (Willen, 2022; Willen et al., 2022).

Finally, as we look with excitement to a bold new horizon in the cross-cultural study of religion, it is important to pause and congratulate the ERM team for their many pioneering achievements. Their work over the past decade has recalibrated expectations for quality in the cross-cultural science of religion. And we would like to underscore Purzycki et al.'s advice to cultural scientists for vigilance and rigor in data collection. We are extremely grateful to the team for their arduous work and many excellent contributions.

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