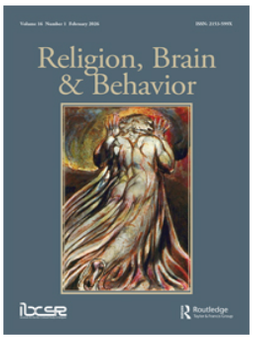

Religion, Brain & Behavior

ISSN: 2153-599X (Print) 2153-5981 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rrbb20

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To cite this article: Wesley J. Wildman, Robert M. Ross, Ryan T. McKay, Richard Sosis, Joseph Watts, John H. Shaver, Michael E. Price, Irene Cristofori & Suzanne Hoogeveen (2026) Uncoordinated, contradictory, yet cumulatively effective: how four critiques of the humanities study of religion inflict collateral damage on the scientific study of religion, Religion, Brain & Behavior, 16:1, 1-8, DOI: 10.1080/2153599X.2026.2630498

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/2153599X.2026.2630498

Published online: 09 Mar 2026.

RELIGION, BRAIN & BEHAVIOR
2026, VOL. 16, NO. 1, 1–8
https://doi.org/10.1080/2153599X.2026.2630498

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

EDITORIAL

Uncoordinated, contradictory, yet cumulatively effective: how four critiques of the humanities study of religion inflict collateral damage on the scientific study of religion

Introduction

The Scientific Study of Religion (SSR) is the empirically grounded, hypothesis-driven investigation of religious beliefs, behaviors, and institutions using methods from the cognitive, psychological, social, evolutionary, and brain sciences. One of SSR's natural partner disciplines is the humanities study of religion (HSR), meaning the non-sectarian, descriptive-interpretive study of religion in humanities and interpretative-social-science modalities, typically pursued in university departments of religious studies. For many years, HSR has been in methodological, political, and institutional turmoil, and SSR is suffering collateral damage.

HSR faces four prominent critiques—arising from secular humanism, postcritical hermeneutics, Marxian ideology, and post-secular cosmopolitan theory—that disagree with one another yet converge in eroding support for HSR as a legitimate form of inquiry deserving a home in the contemporary research university. Each critique purports to undermine either the category of "religion," the method of detachment aiming at unbiased description and explanation, or the institutional rationale for religious-studies departments, leading to programmatic reorganization or cuts. Thus, despite their mutual incompatibilities, these critiques have a shared outcome: skepticism towards religion as a stable, legitimate object for descriptive and explanatory research.

These critiques directly impact HSR, in the first instance, then indirectly SSR, because one home for SSR is departments hosting HSR. Fortunately, SSR has additional homes in the university (e.g., departments of history, classics, archaeology, sociology, anthropology, economics, psychology, neuroscience, medicine, public health, data science, etc.), but the problems facing HSR still harm SSR, especially through distancing SSR from specialized academic knowledge of religion by eliminating natural intra-departmental connections. It follows that an effective defense of SSR must confront diverse pressures that, despite lacking a consistent direction, prove cumulatively corrosive to one of its main partner disciplines, HSR. By "cumulative corrosion," we mean measurable losses in unit viability (closures of departments and majors), geographic access (regional "cold spots"), pipelines and feeder disciplines (e.g. ancient languages, classics), and co-located HSR expertise that SSR depends upon for problem formulation, conceptual depth, historical adequacy, and construct validity.

As we show below, focusing on cases from US, UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, curricular program consolidation, methodological suspicion, and category dissolution provide administrators and committees with ready-to-hand justifications for consolidations and cuts. The critiques themselves do not need to be persuasive or even consistent to conjure the kind of political doubt that makes HSR institutionally vulnerable, with collateral effects for SSR.

HSR's and SSR's growth, and the current problematic institutional context for the study of religion

Building on much older strands of research, HSR sprang to life in the middle of the twentieth century, give or take a few decades, with numerous religious studies departments being founded in

many countries. SSR took off later, especially since the 1990s, visible in the rise of the evolutionary and cognitive science of religion and sustained growth in religion-and-health scholarship, also building on older strands of research. Bibliometric studies document marked increases in SSR publications and influence since 2000, to the point that older HSR and newer SSR now divide the annual count of publications roughly evenly (Wildman, 2018). Within this landscape, Religion, Brain & Behavior holds a Q1 ranking in Religious Studies and Q2 in Experimental & Cognitive Psychology on SCImago, indicating the field's consolidation within peer-reviewed science outlets, which is of particular interest for this editorial (SCImago Journal & Country Rank: Religion, Brain & Behavior, 2025).

Even as SSR has established itself, the contraction of the humanities has intensified. The American Academy of Arts & Sciences, Humanities Indicators (2024) reports that the humanities share of all bachelor's degrees awarded declined across nearly every U.S. state from 2012 to 2021, and its 2024 Department Survey (American Academy of Arts & Sciences, Humanities Indicators, 2025) found heightened pessimism among humanities department chairs amid cuts and consolidations. News coverage likewise shows that religious-studies units repeatedly appear on program-review cut lists, including within University of North Carolina campuses at Greensboro (Killian, 2024) and Asheville (Atkinson, 2024), and in national reporting on recent review cycles (Gluckman, 2025).

Evidence of humanities contraction extends well beyond the US. In the UK, sector-wide course discontinuations have hit SHAPE (Social Sciences, Humanities, Arts for People and the Economy) subjects hardest. *The Boar* (Thangavel, 2025) reported that around 4,000 courses have been discontinued at UK universities during 2024 due to financial pressures, and noted that almost all were SHAPE courses. Departmental eliminations have created growing regional "cold spots" where students have no commutable access to humanities options; in particular, the British Academy warns that linguistics, anthropology, classics, and theology are now vulnerable in many regions (Packer, 2025). In Australia, proposed reductions at the Australian National University (ANU) threaten core national humanities infrastructure, including the Humanities Research Centre, the Australian Dictionary of Biography, and the Australian National Dictionary Centre. Beyond ANU, Macquarie University has moved to cut most sociology positions and shutter related majors, while the University of Wollongong has signaled job losses with the possibility that the entire discipline of history could be closed—developments that suggest a sector-wide cost-cutting strategy disproportionately impacting the humanities (Sun, 2025). In Canada, a CBC report documents a long-term decline, noting that humanities enrollment has fallen by about 70,000 students per year between the early 1990s and 2023—roughly 50% over 30 years (Hughes, 2025). The American Academy of Arts & Sciences (2024) summarizes OECD (2024) data showing that the humanities' average share of degrees fell 5% (BA), 11% (MA), and 9% (PhD) from 2015 to 2018, with declines in most OECD countries during that period. This underscores that the contraction is structural and international, not merely local and anecdotal.

Particularly relevant for SSR is the fate of departments supporting HSR. The UK offers clear evidence of contraction akin to what is happening in the US. Religious studies has been cut at the University of Kent, part of a larger wave of SHAPE reductions (Thangavel, 2025), while ancient languages (a pipeline discipline for historical and textual study of religion) have been axed at Cardiff University (Cox, 2024; Rowsell, 2025). The British Academy's concern for the vulnerability of humanities disciplines includes a geographic and structural shrinkage of access to religion-focused study across the UK (Packer, 2025). Together these moves suggest not only generalized humanities contraction but an erosion of academic pathways in religious studies.

These trends indicate widespread undermining of HSR in humanities and social-science institutional contexts. SSR is suffering collateral damage, since HSR and related humanities and social science fields are vital partner disciplines. Where SSR is flourishing, it tends to be outside of departments of religious studies, a pattern indicated in citation networks already evident a decade ago (see Wildman, 2018) and further confirmed by the dearth of SSR faculty positions in departments of religious studies.

Four uncoordinated, contradictory, yet cumulatively effective critiques

The current institutional context has developed over decades as HSR grappled with disputes over the meaning and conceptual validity of its object of study, religion. The critiques of religion as a legitimate object of scholarly attention do not need to be coordinated or even consistent to effectively undermine the feasibility and desirability of departments supporting its study. They merely need to sow doubt sufficient to erode the political will needed to support something internally and externally controversial at a time of increasing financial stress.

The "secular-dismissive" orientation (arising from secular humanism)

Secular dismissals of HSR often hide in plain sight. Public critiques are seldom framed as calls to abolish HSR, which is politically fraught; instead they (a) conflate religious studies with devotional theology, then urge that universities should not privilege religion as a curricular category (as in the Harvard University case, below), (b) appropriate conceptual critiques (e.g., classics such as Asad, 1993; Fitzgerald, 2000; Nongbri, 2013) that destabilize "religion" as a natural kind to question whether distinct departments are warranted, or (c) attack the humanities study of religion as pointless (as in the case of Benjamin Schonthal, a Religious Studies academic from the University of Otago, whose work on Buddhist legal traditions was singled out by the New Zealand government as "pointless"; see Albert, 2025). In practice, these strategic moves, plus broader humanities retrenchment, translate into program reviews and cuts that effectively deprioritize religious studies without ever needing to formulate that as a goal.

A famous Harvard University debate is illustrative. A 2006 proposal for the general-education curriculum aimed to require courses in the "reason and faith" category, on the grounds that we need the academic study of something as important as religion (Harvard may add religion requirement, 2006; Miller, 2007). It was an argument about the importance of religion literacy (Eck, 2006) and HSR, not religious or devotional formation, yet the ensuing debate conflated HSR (rational scholarly understanding of important subject matter) with devotional theology (insider religious faith discourse that supports beliefs, arguably without sufficient warrant). No doubt this was helped along by the proposers' infelicitous choice of wording, "reason and faith," as against "reason and meaning" or some other less inflammatory formulation.

The conflation in question occurred in Steven Pinker's (2006) *The Harvard Crimson* piece, where he argued that universities are "about reason, pure and simple," opposing the juxtaposition of "reason" and "faith" as parallel ways of knowing, and analogizing the pairing to "Astronomy & Astrology." Other scholars tried to point out the conflation (along the lines of Harvard Divinity School's "Core Principles" document, which scrupulously distinguishes the two; see Harvard Divinity School, Religion and Public Life, n.d.), to no avail. Much later, reflecting on Pinker's *Enlightenment Now* (2018), Harvard Divinity School's Francis X. Clooney (2018) referred to Pinker's longer arc of attempts to exclude religion from the curriculum. In fact, aspects of Pinker's 2006 position are defensible, because he is not opposed to the academic study of historically important matters, and he focuses his curricular arguments on resisting the privileging of the study of religion over other allegedly equally important social factors. But the conflation of devotional faith and HSR was also present in his argument. His view did not need to win the day in any formal sense; it just needed to throw a political spanner in the works to derail the curriculum proposal. This is often how the "secular-dismissive" orientation works.

The "anti-secular, anti-detachment" orientation (arising from postcritical hermeneutics)

A second critique comes from a direction roughly opposite to that of secular dismissal. Postcritical hermeneutics argues that the default academic posture of critical distance—what Paul Ricoeur (1970) called a "hermeneutics of suspicion" and Eve Sedgwick (1997) famously recast as "paranoid

reading"—too often preemptively forecloses alternative ways of knowing. Recent work urges scholars to complement critique with attachment, receptivity, and empathic reading, so that research can be transformed by close engagement with its objects. Mary Dunn's 2024 article in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (JAAR) is a case in point: Dunn proposes moving "beyond the limits of critique" to legitimate forms of scholarly attachment that can be intellectually and existentially transformative for the researcher. Rita Felski (e.g., *The Limits of Critique* (2015)) likewise calls for balancing suspicion with attention, affect, and aesthetic attunement, arguing that detachment is not the only route to insight. For this orientation, taking religion seriously may involve allowing it to affect the researcher, not merely limiting research to describing and explaining religion at arm's length.

For religious studies, the postcritical turn broadens what counts as valid scholarly stances and methods: ethnographies may incorporate first-person and affective elements; textual work may foreground constructive, appreciative readings rather than purely critical ones; and research designs may explicitly treat transformative encounters as epistemically productive. A concrete example is Dunn (2024) itself: appearing in JAAR's "Discussing the Discipline" forum, the article signals editorial space for the postcritical method within the flagship journal of HSR. More broadly, the humanities' cross-disciplinary postcritical discourse (e.g. Drury, 2020) has begun to normalize more empathic approaches across venues read by HSR scholars. The postcritical turn is already shaping graduate training and review standards in parts of HSR (Dunn, 2024) as well as in adjacent disciplines (Drury, 2020), even as prominent overviews document continued skepticism and misunderstandings in other parts of the university (Anker & Felski, 2017; Felski, 2023).

The upshot for SSR is a complex pair of tensions. On the one hand, postcritical advocates worry that strict third-person neutrality misses lived religious meaning, while SSR warns that foregrounding attachment can undercut replicability, hypothesis testing, causal inference, and inference to best explanation (see Wildman et al., 2024). This makes SSR faculty positions less likely to be targets of consensus within religious-studies departments, creating local impasses in hiring, even when both sides share substantive research interests. On the other hand, in any university-wide departmental review, SSR might normally be inclined to defend HSR as a vital partner discipline, yet wider university skepticism toward postcritical approaches makes such a defense inopportune.

The "ideology-all-the-way-down" orientation (arising from Marxian ideology)

A third critique is essentially a moral protest against the masked abuse of power within the academy. Marx-inspired ideology-critique treats religion as ideology—that is, as a social formation whose function is to mask, reproduce, or normalize power relations. In this view, neutral description is illusory: the scholar is always already caught in ideological discourse, so the scholarly obligation is not to describe "objectively" (whatever that is taken to mean) but to unmask the ideological work being done (including by scholars themselves). Tyler Roberts's 2005 article in *The Journal of Religion* reconstructs debates around Ivan Strenski (1998) and others to show how scholarly categories (such as "religion") are rhetorical effects that produce the phenomena they claim merely to describe, whereas the on-the-ground reality is far more complex and defies simple categorization. As Roberts (2005) notes, the result is a climate in which religious studies' descriptive claims are regarded with suspicion because, on this reading, description itself performs ideology rather than neutrally standing outside it.

In practice, ideology-critique pressures HSR away from "neutral" scholarship and toward analyses that foreground power, material interests, and historicized discourse. This has institutional implications: it reframes departmental aims, prioritizing critical genealogies and discourse analysis; it casts doubt on stand-alone "religion" categories, nudging programs to merge with cultural studies or anthropology or history, or else to re-brand as "religion, culture, and X" units; and it reorients curricula away from "world religions" surveys toward theory courses that may not even use the suspect word "religion" in the title. Public reporting shows how such pressures can feed administrative narratives about redundancy or overlap: for example, at Duke University, debates among faculty

over reorganizing graduate training in religion (separating or consolidating with the Divinity School) foregrounded resource, duplication, and program-identity questions, the very terrain on which ideology-critique's skepticism about autonomous "religion" categories often plays out (the Academic Council narrowly voted against a new stand-alone religious-studies PhD, citing structural concerns; see Despa & Tendler, 2025). While the Duke University case is not reducible to Marxian critique, it illustrates how arguments about category construction and institutional duplication can lead to consolidation rather than expansion of religion programs, thereby potentially eliminating a vital partner discipline for SSR.

The "conceptual-dissolution" orientation (arising from post-secular cosmopolitan theory)

Post-secular cosmopolitanization argues that the familiar religious-secular binary is dissolving under conditions of globalization, transnational networks, and digital entanglements. In this frame, "religion" and "secular" are co-constituted within shifting governance, economic, and legal regimes—and they take different shapes across political-economic contexts. What once looked like separate domains now interpenetrate at multiple scales. For example, according to Abbas Jong (2025), it is difficult to tease apart the religious and the secular in transnational religious movements (as actors beyond the nation-state), digital religious networks (as part of the global entanglements reshaping authority and regulation), supranational governance arrangements (where religion and secular orders are co-constituted), and the integration of religious actors, norms, and ethical frameworks into global economic, legal, and political structures (blurring the religious-secular divide).

Jong synthesizes a theory of cosmopolitan entanglement, contending that the binary itself no longer tracks social reality and urging analytic frameworks to move beyond it. Related classics in method and theory—Talal Asad's (1993) genealogy of "religion" and Brent Nongbri's (2013) history of the modern concept of religion—reinforce the point: "religion" is not a universal, transhistorical object, but a modern category with variable boundaries.

If, contrary to the first two critiques, the religion-secular divide is obsolete, then the object of religious studies may be conceptually unstable. This tends to push departments toward reconfiguration (e.g., "religion & public life," "religion, culture, and society," "global studies," or "area studies") and to migrate religion-research projects into interdisciplinary centers. We can see institutional echoes of this, as mentioned above, in program restructurings such as the University of Kent's discontinuation of religious studies amid broader SHAPE re-alignments (administratively framed as modernizing degrees for transdisciplinary demand). In North America, Harvard University's Religion and Public Life program exemplifies the boundary-blurring impulse (even as it has been subject to review and suspension of specific initiatives; see Connolly & Karabolli, 2025; Ng et al., 2025), signaling a shift from religion as a distinct sphere to religion embedded in governance, conflict, health, and policy.

The upshot for SSR is a complex tension. Eliminating a religious-studies department because it has no conceptually stable object removes a natural venue for SSR, yet allowing the conceptual-dissolution positions to stand interferes with ordinary SSR tasks such as operationalizing "religion" for survey, experimental, or computational work and becomes intellectually and politically fraught.

How should SSR respond?

SSR doesn't need to take a stand on fights about whether the category of "religion" is conceptually stable or ideologically loaded (though some experts have; see Sosis, 2019) in order to operationalize it in a specific research context for scientific study. Instead of centrally engaging politically fraught debates, which HSR may need to do for its survival:

- SSR should affirm the value of empirically grounded research without hubris or absolutism;

- SSR should demonstrate how hypothesis-driven, multi-level accounts (cognitive, social, economic, evolutionary, ecological, psychological, neuroscientific) can illuminate religious worldviews and lifeways while welcoming expertise from every domain; and
- SSR should recognize the critical role of expertise in the humanities disciplines, which are fighting for their very survival.

Given humanities enrollment declines and departmental reviews, we note that SSR's natural partner disciplines and institutional alliances can include psychology, sociology, economics, anthropology, cognitive science, neuroscience, medicine, public health, and data science, among others. SSR belongs to the university at large, not just to religious studies departments. Yet, maintaining deep collaboration with religious-studies scholars in the humanities and interpretative social sciences is ideal for integrating the most profound knowledge of religious beliefs and behaviors into high-quality scientific research.

Post-secular theory rightly warns against naïve binaries. Yet SSR can operationalize religion, spirituality, worldviews, and lifeways with transparent measures, updating constructs rather than abandoning them, and without needing to wade through intricate and seemingly irresolvable debates over method and theory. The religion-and-health literature shows how construct refinement and measurement validity can work well (Yaminfirooz et al., 2024). And staying close to methods broadly understood and accepted within numerous university disciplines improves the legibility of SSR for the many differently trained colleagues who are inevitably involved in departmental reviews. This suggests that incorporating SSR faculty positions into religious-studies departments may be protective of humanities approaches to HSR, but that is very unlikely to occur under current circumstances. SSR experts must instead partner with those possessing expert knowledge of religion wherever they can be found in the university, including colleagues in humanities and interpretative social sciences.

Eleanor Roosevelt's advice still applies: "Do what you feel in your heart to be right—for you'll be criticized anyway. You'll be damned if you do, and damned if you don't." The point is not to be anti-secular, anti-postcritical, anti-ideology, or anti-post-secular, but to learn from each critique—recognize them as useful warnings—and then do the work of SSR: state hypotheses, operationalize constructs, gather data, analyze carefully, revise theories, report transparently, and adapt methods as required. SSR's intellectual home is the research university writ large; its stakeholders span the sciences and the humanities. Let's keep doing the work, because in the face of contradictory criticisms, research excellence and explanatory success are the best replies.

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