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Making sense of the cognitive and evolutionary science of religion as an intensively multidisciplinary field

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EDITORIAL

Check for updates

Making sense of the cognitive and evolutionary science of religion as an intensively multidisciplinary field

This issue of *Religion, Brain & Behavior* presents a target article by six leaders of the cognitive and evolutionary science of religion (CESR), led by Claire White, the field's first textbook author (*An introduction to the cognitive science of religion: Connecting evolution, brain, cognition and culture*, Routledge, 2021). Justin Barrett, Pascal Boyer, E. Thomas Lawson, Robert McCauley, Claire White, and Harvey Whitehouse may not be household names, exactly, but everyone working in CESR knows them. The resulting survey of CESR reads to those who have tracked the field for many years like a celebration: key theories and important perspectives from the last few decades gathered in one place. The expert discussion surfaces missing pieces in the survey and raises questions about future directions.

This kind of field survey matters because CESR is gloriously multidisciplinary. People arrive from religious studies, anthropology, psychology, cognitive science, evolutionary biology, philosophy, history, and neuroscience, each carrying a different toolkit and a different canon. That breadth is the field's great strength. But it presents an ongoing pedagogical difficulty: while White's textbook covers some basics, we lack a comprehensive map by which a newcomer—or a colleague crossing in from an adjacent specialization—can take in the whole terrain. The predictable costs are gaps, where entire literatures are unaddressed; redundancy, where the same finding is renamed; and reinvention, where questions answered years ago are answered again. There is often misunderstanding, too, with people making serious errors in assessing the scope of CESR, including its active questions, its methods, and its purpose.

As guardians of the flagship journal of CESR, the editors of *Religion, Brain & Behavior* (*RBB*) feel a special obligation to orient students and researchers to the field. Publishing this target article is one way we do that. Another is to create a *Study Guide for the Cognitive and Evolutionary Science of Religion*, inspired by White's textbook and this target article.

This *Study Guide*, which we hope to launch by the end of 2026, is an attempt to create the comprehensive, fully accessible map CESR needs. It aims to let an interested reader see the full scope of the field, follow the arc of its development, encounter its major findings and the literature behind them, and locate the questions still open. Much of it will undeniably be contestable, but we believe it will also be undeniably useful. It is, transparently, an AI-abetted project. Its structure, drafting, and cross-referencing are being assembled with the help of large language models and then disciplined to the field's own sources and standards. We say so plainly because the method is a demonstration that these tools can be turned toward careful, citation-grounded service of a scholarly community.

The *Study Guide for the Cognitive and Evolutionary Science of Religion* is a work in progress. Once it is launched, we plan to improve it and expand it with periodic updates. It is *RBB*'s gift to the field of CESR, offered to celebrate this issue's target article and the wonderful minds behind it. Stay tuned for more details in the next issue of *RBB*.

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