# Many religious people view science favorably, but reject certain scientific theories

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A new study finds that many U.S. adults—roughly one in five—are deeply religious, know a lot about science, and support many practical uses of science and technology in everyday life, but reject scientific explanations of creation and evolution.

"We were surprised to find that many people who are knowledgeable about science and appreciative of its practical uses reject certain well-established scientific theories," said Timothy L. O'Brien, an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Evansville and the lead author of the study, which appears in the February issue of the *American Sociological Review*.

"This finding is particularly interesting because these people who view both science and religion favorably—people who hold what we call a post-secular perspective—have relatively high levels of education and income, and many social scientists assume that high levels of education and income, as well as positive views of science are incompatible with religiosity."

But, O'Brien said the study calls that "common assumption" into question. "We find that many highly educated, well-informed, religious individuals accept scientific theories about topics such as geology, radioactivity, planetary motion, genetics, and probability while rejecting mainstream scientific accounts of evolution and the big bang," he said.

Titled, "Traditional, Modern, and Post-Secular Perspectives on Science

and Religion in the United States," the study relies on nationally representative data on U.S. adults from the 2006, 2008, and 2010 waves of the General Social Survey. The study considers people who self-identified as Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, and followers of other faiths, as well as individuals who did not identify with a religious group.

As part of their analysis, O'Brien and his co-author Shiri Noy, an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Wyoming, determined that U.S. adults hold one of three perspectives based on their knowledge and attitudes about science and religion. Twenty-one percent hold a post-secular perspective, which values both science and religion, but which rejects science in favor of religion when it comes to topics such as creation and evolution. Forty-three percent hold a traditional perspective, which favors religion over science, and 36 percent hold a modern perspective, which favors science over religion.

"These three worldviews are held across religious groups, political parties, and social classes," according to O'Brien, who said social scientists have typically focused on studying people's perspectives on science or views on religion separately rather than looking at them simultaneously.

"Ours is the first study of the U.S. public that examines perspectives on science and religion in tandem," he said. "In doing so, our study uncovers a previously unidentified group of well-informed people who are appreciative of science and technology's social uses, but who are deeply religious and who reject certain scientific theories in favor of religious ones."

Among these post-seculars, more than 90 percent agree with contemporary scientific theories about geology, radioactivity, and planetary motion, but only 6 percent believe that the universe began with a huge explosion. Even fewer—3 percent of post-seculars—agree that

humans evolved from earlier animals.

In addition, 48 percent of post-seculars believe that the Bible is the literal word of God, compared to 31 percent of all U.S.adults, 46 percent of traditionals, and 3 percent of moderns. Post-seculars also report the greatest strength of religious affiliation as compared to traditionals and moderns.

"Our findings indicate that post-seculars are the most religious," O'Brien said.

In terms of the study's implications, the research "shows that differences in people's views of science and religion do not necessarily reflect a lack of knowledge or understanding," said O'Brien, who emphasized that "post-seculars are scientifically literate" yet still reject scientific explanations of the origins of human life and the universe.

"This suggests that bridging gaps between different groups of people may have less to do with reducing knowledge deficits among them and more to do with increasing empathy for and awareness of different lifestyles and cultural preferences," O'Brien said.

Provided by American Sociological Association

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