

Indian scientists significantly more religious than UK scientists

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Elaine Howard Ecklund. Credit: Jeff Fitlow/Rice University

Indian scientists are significantly more religious than United Kingdom scientists, according to the first cross-national study of religion and spirituality among scientists.

The U.K. and India results from Religion Among Scientists in International Context (RASIC) study were presented at the Policies and Perspectives: Implications From the Religion Among Scientists in International Context Study conference held today in London. The conference was sponsored by the Religion and Public Life Program and the Baker Institute for Public Policy. The U.K. results were also

presented at the Uses and Abuses of Biology conference Sept. 22 at Cambridge University's Faraday Institute in Cambridge, England.

The surveys and in-depth interviews with scientists revealed that while 65 percent of U.K. scientists identify as nonreligious, only 6 percent of Indian scientists identify as nonreligious. In addition, while only 12 percent of scientists in the U.K. attend [religious services](#) on a regular basis—once a month or more—32 percent of scientists in India do.

Elaine Howard Ecklund, Rice's Autrey Professor of Sociology and the study's principal investigator, said the U.K. and India data are being released simultaneously because of the history between the U.K. and India. She noted that their differences are quite interesting to compare.

"India and the U.K. are at the same time deeply intertwined historically while deeply different religiously," Ecklund said. "There is a vastly different character of [religion](#) among scientists in the U.K. than in India – potentially overturning the view that scientists are universal carriers of secularization."

Despite the number of U.K. scientists identifying themselves as nonreligious, 49 percent of U.K. survey respondents acknowledged that there are basic truths in many religions. In addition, 11 percent of U.K. survey respondents said they do believe in God without any doubt, and another 8 percent said they believe in a higher power of some kind.

Ecklund noted that although the U.K. is known for its secularism, scientists in particular are significantly more likely to identify as not belonging to a religion than members of the general population.

"According to available data, only 50 percent of the general U.K. population responded that they did not belong to a religion, compared with 65 percent of U.K. scientists in the survey," Ecklund said. "In

addition, 47 percent of the U.K. population report never attending religious services compared with 68 percent of scientists."

According to the India survey, 73 percent of scientists responded that there are basic truths in many religions, 27 percent said they believe in God and 38 percent expressed belief in a higher power of some kind. However, while only 4 percent of the general Indian population said they never attend religious services, 19 percent of Indian scientists said they never attend.

"Despite the high level of religiosity evident among Indian scientists when it comes to religious affiliation, we can see here that when we look at religious practices, Indian scientists are significantly more likely than the Indian general population to never participate in a religious service or ritual, even at home," Ecklund said.

Although there appear to be striking differences in the religious views of U.K. and Indian scientists, less than half of both groups (38 percent of U.K. scientists and 18 percent of Indian scientists) perceived conflict between religion and science.

"When we interviewed Indian scientists in their offices and laboratories, many quickly made it clear that there is no reason for religion and science to be in conflict; for some Indian scientists, religious beliefs actually lead to a deeper sense of doing justice through their work as scientists," Ecklund said. "And even many U.K. scientists who are themselves not personally religious still do not think there needs to be a conflict between religion and science."

The U.K. survey included 1,581 scientists, representing a 50 percent response rate. The India survey included 1,763 scientists from 159 universities and/or research institutions. Both surveys also utilized population data from the World Values Survey to make comparisons

with the general public. In addition, the researchers conducted nearly 200 in-depth interviews with U.K. and Indian scientists, many of these in person.

The complete study will include a [survey](#) of 22,000 biologists and physicists at different points in their careers at top universities and research institutes in the U.S., U.K., Turkey, Italy, France, India, Hong Kong and Taiwan—nations that have very different approaches to the relationship between religious and state institutions, different levels of religiosity and different levels of scientific infrastructure. Respondents were randomly selected from a sampling frame of nearly 50,000 scientists and compiled by undergraduate and graduate students at Rice University through an innovative sampling process. The study will also include qualitative interviews with 700 scientists. The entire RASIC study will be completed by the end of 2015.

Rice University's Baker Institute Science and Technology Fellow Kirstin Matthews and C.V. Starr Transnational China Fellow Steven Lewis serve as co-principal investigators for the project. The project is funded by a grant from the Templeton World Charity Foundation. A related study that is part of the research initiative is funded by the National Science Foundation and examines Ethics among Scientists in China, U.K. and U.S.

Provided by Rice University

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