

How 'science popularizers' influence public opinion on religion

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Elaine Howard Ecklund. Credit: Jeff Fitlow/Rice University

Two prominent scientists with drastically different views on the relationship of science and religion - Richard Dawkins and Francis Collins - have an equally different influence on these views among

people who are unfamiliar with their work, according to new research from Rice University and West Virginia University.

For the study, sociologists examined whether two high-profile "[science popularizers](#)"—scientists who attempt to help the [public](#) understand science and how it relates to people's lives—make the public more or less likely to view science and [religion](#) as being in conflict. The researchers found that people's perceptions of the religion-science relationship were not influenced when they read about a scientist who believes science and religion are in conflict (Dawkins); however, reading about a scientist who believes both institutions influence and guide each other (Collins) shifted respondents toward a collaborative view of religion and science.

Rice University's Elaine Howard Ecklund said that the findings might be explained by what is likely a "significant difference in the perceived credibility of Dawkins and Collins." She is the Herbert S. Autrey Professor of Sociology at Rice and director of Rice's Religion and Public Life Program.

"The Influence of Science Popularizers on the Public's View of Religion and Science: An Experimental Assessment" will appear in an upcoming edition of the journal *Public Understandings of Science*. The research is part of a larger study, Religious Understandings of Science (RUS), which explores how religious Americans think through complex scientific issues. Ecklund is the principal investigator for the RUS.

Dawkins is a renowned British evolutionary biologist and also an atheist and critic of creationism and intelligent design; Collins is the director of the National Institutes of Health and an evangelical Christian. "Dawkins has been a very vocal and aggressive supporter of the idea that religion inherently clashes with science and that science inherently undermines religion," the researchers wrote. "On the other hand, Collins has

presented himself as evidence that religion and science can not only coexist but that they can even enlighten each other's claims." Each has published best-selling books, given many interviews and participated in debates on their respective views of the science-religion relationship.

"While Dawkins and Collins might both be perceived as having the credentials to make them an expert, research has shown that the U.S. public is generally distrustful of atheists and views them more negatively than most other ethnic, religious and minority groups," said Christopher Scheitle, an assistant professor of sociology at West Virginia University and the paper's lead author. "On the other hand, religious individuals are often perceived as more trustworthy, especially as viewed by other religious individuals."

The RUS featured a national survey of over 10,000 Americans. Part of the survey asked individuals if they had previously heard of either Dawkins or Collins. The RUS survey revealed that Dawkins was more widely known among the 10,000 survey participants than Collins (21.4 percent recognition versus 4.3 percent recognition).

Some of the participants who said they were unfamiliar with Collins were provided a biographical description highlighting his views on the religion-science relationship. This group of survey respondents was 15 percent more likely to agree that religion and science can coexist after reading about Collins. In contrast, participants who said they were unfamiliar with Dawkins and read about his life and views appeared to be completely unaffected and reported no change in their individual viewpoints.

Ecklund noted that previous research shows that people are more likely to listen and accept what a public figure is saying if they see themselves as similar to that figure.

"Given that there are more people in the U.S. population (and hence in our data) who would identify as a Christian than atheist, Collins is likely to have more impact with that audience," Ecklund said.

Ecklund said that the experiment's findings have important implications for how institutions and their representatives shape public opinion.

The John Templeton Foundation funded the study. The paper is available online at <http://bit.ly/1GSbAp6>.

Provided by Rice University

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