

# Religious people more likely to oppose reproductive technologies

April 25 2017

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Elaine Howard Ecklund, the Herbert S. Autrey Chair in Social Sciences at Rice and the study's lead author. Credit: Jeff Fitlow/Rice University

As new and more effective human reproductive genetic technologies (RGTs) develop, people of faith are more likely to disapprove of these

tools than nonreligious people, a new Rice University study found. Evangelical Christians are the most likely of any religious group to stand in opposition, the researchers found.

The study examined how religious and nonreligious people felt about RGTs that could reveal qualities of an unborn child, such as whether the child had a disease ("disease technologies"), and those that allowed parents to select qualities for a child, such as gender, [hair color](#) and eye color ("enhancement technologies"). It included a general population survey of more than 10,000 people and 270 qualitative interviews with individuals living in the Midwest and South from a variety of religious traditions.

Elaine Howard Ecklund, the Herbert S. Autrey Chair in Social Sciences at Rice and the study's lead author, found over the course of her research that feelings about the use of RGTs vary not only between religious and nonreligious persons but also among [religious groups](#).

When asked about the use of RGTs to prevent disease, 23 percent of evangelicals said this technology was morally wrong, compared with 9 percent of Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs and Jains and 8 percent of Jews. Only 4 percent of agnostics and atheists said this technology was "morally wrong."

Religious groups had a much stronger negative reaction about the morality of using RGTs to select qualities such as gender, hair color and [eye color](#). Eighty percent of evangelicals said that this type of technology was morally wrong, compared with 66 percent of Jews and 57 percent of Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs and Jains. Just over half - 55 percent - of agnostics and atheists said this type of [technology](#) was morally wrong.

"A large proportion of religious and nonreligious people feel morally

uncomfortable with enhancement technologies," Ecklund said.

During her in-depth interviews with study participants, Ecklund found that the "Creator Schema," which emphasizes God's control and God's purposes and plans in human suffering, predominated among Evangelical Christians and at times mainline Protestants and Muslims. However, Jewish respondents expressed ambivalence toward disease RGTs and did not draw on the Creator Schema.

One young member of a nondenominational Evangelical Protestant church communicated a strong version of a Creator Schema by justifying opposition to RGTs.

"I believe God is in control, and that He's taking care of everything and (if) this child has a disease, then that's what God wants for this child," he said.

While the Creator Schema emphasizes God's role as creator and boundaries between God and humans, the "Co-Creator Schema" provides for human partnership with God in improving life. Another participant referenced this schema in his feelings on the use of RGTs to eliminate disease.

"If I could do something, then sure, yes, I would want to know," he said. He lamented that when people rejected this possibility and emphasized "just God's ability to heal and deliver ... then people die, because they neglect the physical responsibilities that God has given them."

"This participant's emphasis on the concept of 'responsibilities' that God gives people suggests that humans have a partner role with God in certain kinds of actions, in this case healing genetic disease," Ecklund said.

More than half of all groups surveyed - including nonreligious groups - disagreed with the use of enhancement RGTs, and many feared that enhancement RGTs might be used for "unwise ends," the authors said.

"They often opposed enhancement RGTs because they saw this as related to eugenics, fearing that people would actively select or preference embryos with certain characteristics," said study co-author Jared Peifer of Baruch College.

A participant from an evangelical congregation said of enhancement RGTs, "That's obviously going to the 'Brave New World' extreme of we're going to be our own gods and choose our own destiny. ... That goes back to another level. ... It reminds me of Nazi Germany, those things that - you want certain types - certain types of people in your society, you know I want my child to have this color or whatever."

However, the religious individuals who supported enhancement RGTs mostly did so by considering these technologies within the abilities that God provides to humans, thereby drawing on the Co-Creator Schema.

"None of this is really a problem for me because if it happens, I believe God provided the way for it to happen," said a participant from an African-American evangelical congregation.

Ecklund said that the study's findings suggest that moral sensitivity rather than moral reasoning is likely to be employed as a way of addressing issues that are technologically complex under conditions where there is a scarcity of good information with which to morally reason, as is the case with enhancement RGTs.

"As moral reasoning on the topic becomes organized, we expect moral sensitivity to become less noticeably apparent as individuals begin to draw more readily on established cultural beliefs," she said.

**More information:** Elaine Howard Ecklund et al, Moral Schemas in Articulation and Intuition: How Religious People Evaluate Human Reproductive Genetic Technologies, *Sociological Forum* (2017). [DOI: 10.1111/socf.12330](https://doi.org/10.1111/socf.12330)

Provided by Rice University

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