

Some faiths more likely to turn to religion for answers to science

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When it comes to seeking answers to questions about science, evangelical and black Protestants and Mormons are more likely than the general population to turn to religion, according to a new study by researchers from Rice University's Religion and Public Life Program, the University of Nevada-Reno and West Virginia University.

The study, which is slated to appear in an upcoming edition of the journal *Public Understanding of Science*, is the first to measure whether people would actively consult a religious authority or source of information with a question about [science](#), said lead researcher Elaine Howard Ecklund, the Herbert S. Autrey Chair in Social Sciences, a professor of sociology at Rice and director of Rice's Religion and Public Life Program.

"Our findings suggest that religion does not necessarily push individuals away from science sources, but religion might lead people to turn to religious sources in addition to scientific sources," Ecklund said.

The study, "Scientists and Religious Leaders Compete for Cultural Authority of Science," is based on a survey of 10,241 Americans who provided information about their confidence and interest in science, their religious characteristics and their political ideology. The sample included a wide range of people, including all religious groups as well as the nonreligious.

"People have many places to look for scientific news and information: the internet, books or documentaries by science popularizers, museums

or social media," Ecklund said. "But there is good reason to believe some look beyond scientific sources of information when [questions](#) arise about science. Some segments of the public, for example, are skeptical of the scientific community when it comes to topics like climate change, evolution or vaccines."

Ecklund and colleagues found that the general survey population was more likely to consult a scientific source than a religious source when seeking answers to scientific questions. This was also true when the researchers looked at mainline Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Muslims and other non-Christians. For evangelical Protestants, black Protestants and Mormons, however, the gap between the likelihood of consulting a scientific source or a religious source was narrower.

While 16 percent of all survey respondents said they would be somewhat or very likely to consult a religious leader for answers to their science questions, this number jumps to 29 percent when just looking at evangelical Protestants or black Protestants and 25 percent when looking at Mormons. Similarly, 31 percent of evangelical Protestants, 30 percent of black Protestants and 31 percent of Mormons said they would be somewhat or very likely to consult a religious text for answers to scientific questions, compared with 18 percent of overall respondents. When asked whether they would be somewhat or very likely to consult people at their congregation about such questions, 27 percent of evangelicals, 26 percent of black Protestants and 31 percent of Mormons said yes, compared with 16 percent of overall surveyed respondents.

When asked about their views on consulting scientific sources, 37 percent of those surveyed said they would be somewhat or very likely to consult a book written by a Ph.D. scientist for answers to their questions, compared with 34 percent of evangelical Protestants, 39 percent of black Protestants and 46 percent of Mormons. And 53 percent of the general surveyed population said they would be somewhat or very likely to

consult a scientific magazine, compared with 50 percent of evangelical Protestants, 52 percent of black Protestants and 66 percent of Mormons. Finally, 49 percent of all survey respondents said they would be somewhat or very likely to speak with a person working in a scientific occupation, compared with 46 percent of evangelical Protestants, 43 percent of black Protestants and 55 percent of Mormons.

The authors said the research provides helpful implications and insights for science communication.

"In order to reach the large swath of the U.S. population who are religious, scientists and science communicators should be targeting religious leaders and communities," Ecklund said. "If [religious leaders](#) are indeed already being approached with questions about science, it's possible they simply need the information in hand in order to translate accurate scientific information to the public or to connect religious people with scientists themselves."

More information: *Public Understanding of Science* (2017). [DOI: 10.1177/0963662517718145](https://doi.org/10.1177/0963662517718145) , journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0963662517718145

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