

Muslim and Protestant scientists most likely to experience, perceive religious discrimination

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Elaine Howard Ecklund. Credit: Jeff Fitlow/Rice University

Muslim and Protestant scientists are more likely than other U.S. scientists to experience religious discrimination, according to new

research from Rice University and West Virginia University (WVU). The study also shows that for some scientists, religious identity may fuel perceptions of discrimination.

"Perceptions of Religious Discrimination Among U.S. Scientists" will appear in an upcoming edition of the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. The study examined a survey of 879 biologists and 903 physicists at schools classified as U.S. research institutions by the National Research Council. The survey was conducted for a research project known as Religion Among Scientists in International Context.

Authors Christopher Scheitle, an assistant professor of sociology at WVU, and Elaine Howard Ecklund, the Herbert S. Autrey Chair in Social Sciences, director of the Religion and Public Life Program at Rice and principal investigator for the larger project that produced the survey, found that 15 percent of scientists reported experiencing [religious discrimination](#) in their work.

The researchers also found that Muslim scientists were the most likely to experience religious discrimination, with 63.6 percent of those surveyed reporting at least a perception of discrimination on the job. Protestant scientists reported the second-highest percentage of perceived religious discrimination at 40.4 percent.

"Sociologists have evidence that U.S. Muslims are experiencing discrimination more broadly in U.S. society, but some of the dynamics our study picked up may be unique to the academy, such as the higher perception of discrimination among Protestant scientists," Scheitle said.

The researchers were also interested in knowing more about the predictors of discrimination perception. "We wanted to understand whether or not an individual's religious practice and identity as a religious person explained their perception of discrimination," Ecklund

said.

After documenting self-reported religious discrimination among biologists and physicists, the researchers statistically controlled for religious practice (attending religious services, praying, etc.) among these individuals. After adjusting for religious practices, beliefs and demographics, there were no differences in perceived religious discrimination between religious and nonreligious physicists.

However, even after controlling for those other factors, the odds of Protestant biologists perceiving discrimination were almost five times greater than nonreligious biologists, the odds of Jewish biologists perceiving discrimination were seven times greater than nonreligious biologists and the odds of Muslim biologists perceiving discrimination were 30 times greater than nonreligious biologists.

Although the researchers could not find an explanation for the [perception](#) of religious discrimination among biologists, they think it may have something to do with biologists' religious identity.

"Tensions around religion and science are more concentrated in biology, with discussions of stem cells, evolution and similar issues," Scheitle said. "This profession may be one where people are very self-conscious of being religious, and we believe an individual's self-identification as a religious [biologist](#) might actually fuel their perceptions of discrimination regardless of how much they are practicing that religion."

Ecklund and Scheitle hope the research will help scientists become more self-aware about the potential dynamics of perceived discrimination.

"There is often an assumption among scientists that everyone is irreligious," Scheitle said. "While it is true that academic scientists are, on average, less religious than the general public, religious scientists do

exist and they are working in an environment where they might be seen as or at least feel like outsiders."

The research was part of Religion Among Scientists in International Context, a multi-nation study aimed at understanding how [scientists](#) view [religion](#), ethics and gender. Data collection was funded by a major grant from the Templeton World Charity Foundation, as well as smaller grants from the National Science Foundation (NSF) and Rice's Religion and Public Life Program.

The researchers plan to continue to examine issues of religious discrimination and violence. They have recently received an NSF grant that will support a national survey to measure the general public's experiences with and perceptions of religious [discrimination](#) and victimization.

More information: Christopher P. Scheitle et al, Perceptions of Religious Discrimination Among U.S. Scientists, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (2018). [DOI: 10.1111/jssr.12503](https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12503)

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