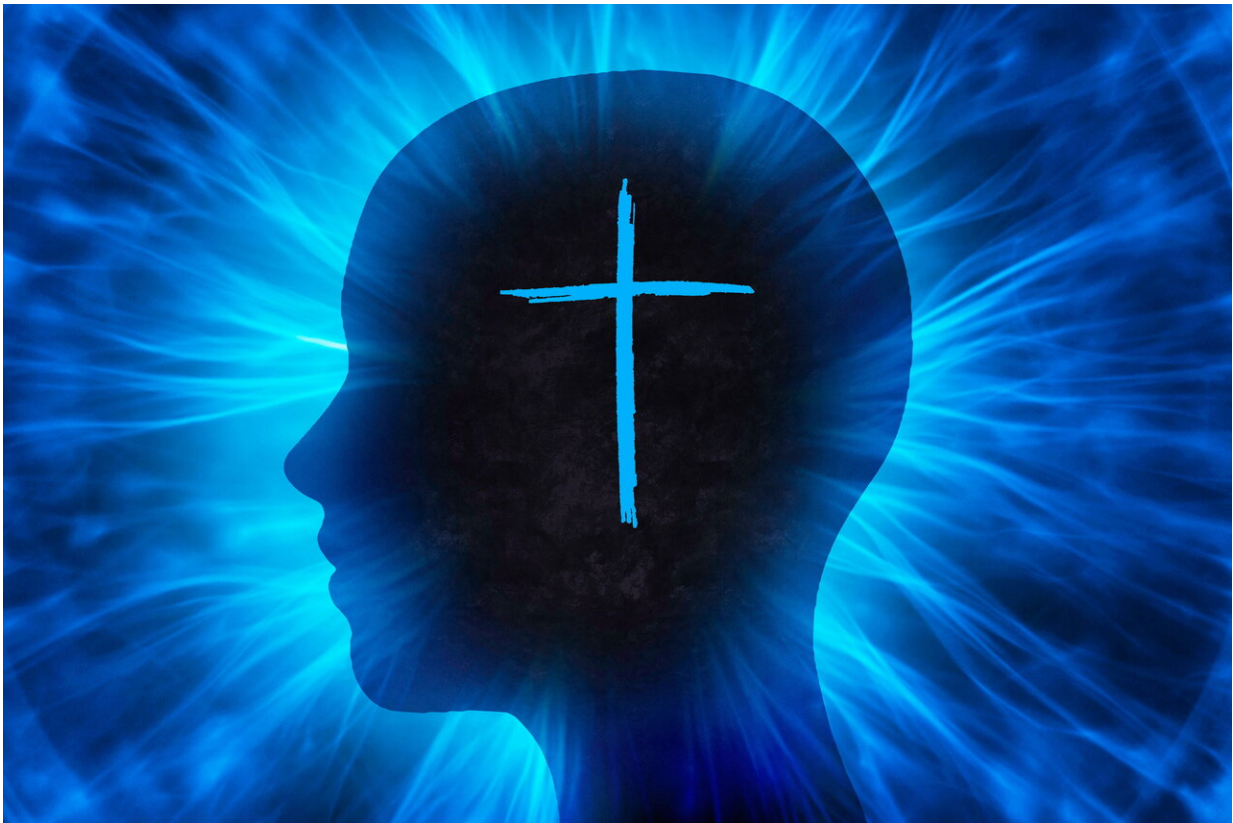


# Can religion be explained by brain wiring? The faithful say no

December 20 2019, by Amy McCaig

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Credit: Rice University

Is there a "God spot" in the brain that determines whether you're hardwired to be religious? New research from Rice University finds that nonbelievers are more likely than the faithful to think that's true.

"Can Religiosity Be Explained by 'Brain Wiring'? An Analysis of U.S. Adults' Opinions" builds on significant literature about [neurotheology](#), or the connection between religion and the mind.

"One of the new frontiers of the [science](#) and faith interface has to do with the [brain](#) and understanding what the public thinks about the role of the brain in explaining religious experience," said Elaine Howard Ecklund, a sociology professor at Rice and the study's co-author and principal investigator. She is Rice's Herbert S. Autrey Chair in Social Sciences and the director of the university's Religion and Public Life Program.

Data for the study came from the Religious Understandings of Science survey, fielded in December 2013 and January 2014. A total of 10,241 U.S. adults were invited to complete a survey asking them the extent to which [religious belief](#) and experience can be explained by science, specifically [brain wiring](#). The researchers examined the influences of demographics, religious differences, education and attitudes about science and religion on attitudes towards whether [religious experience](#) can be explained by brain wiring.

The analysis is unique, says Christopher Scheitle, a West Virginia University sociologist who co-authored the study, "because it focuses on whether science can directly explain religiosity itself rather than just contradict a single religious claim or moral tenet."

The results revealed that only about 15 percent of U.S. adults think brain wiring can explain differences in religiosity, with 3.5 percent of these individuals strongly agreeing with this claim. Evangelical Protestants (about 32 percent) and Jews (about 36 percent) were the most likely of any religious group to strongly disagree that the way the brain is configured can explain faith.

Meanwhile, 62 percent of the most religious people in the survey (by their own self-assessment) said brain wiring does not explain religious beliefs, compared to 44 percent of the least religious people thinking it does. Women were more likely than men to be skeptical about the relationship between religion and brain wiring. And people with [college degrees](#) (a bachelor's degree or higher) were more likely to believe that factors aside from brain wiring contribute to religious beliefs.

"Findings like ours show that in general the public is suspicious of the idea that science can completely explain religion," Ecklund said. "What surprised us most is that the majority of most groups think this is an unfounded idea."

The researchers hope the work will provide more insight on the relationship between religion and science.

"Better understanding of the relationship between [religion](#) and science can provide us with valuable insights about how scientific claims may be received and understood by different kinds of [religious people](#) and how religious identities intersect with many other important identities," Ecklund concluded. "This is an important issue because understanding the brain and its impact on how we see meaning in life is vitally important, and as scientists continue to understand the brain better, social scientists need to examine the social impact of such findings."

**More information:** Sharan Kaur Mehta et al. Can Religiosity Be Explained by 'Brain Wiring'? An Analysis of US Adults' Opinions, *Religions* (2019). [DOI: 10.3390/rel10100586](https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10100586)

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