

# Science and religion do mix

21 September 2011, By David Ruth and Amy Hodges

Throughout history, science and religion have appeared as being in perpetual conflict, but a new study by Rice University suggests that only a minority of scientists at major research universities see religion and science as requiring distinct boundaries.

"When it comes to questions about the meaning of life, ways of understanding reality, origins of Earth and how life developed on it, many have seen [religion](#) and science as being at odds and even in irreconcilable [conflict](#)," said Rice [sociologist](#) Elaine Howard Ecklund. But a majority of scientists interviewed by Ecklund and colleagues viewed both religion and science as "valid avenues of knowledge" that can bring broader understanding to important questions, she said.

Ecklund summarized her findings in "Scientists Negotiate Boundaries Between Religion and Science," which appears in the September issue of the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. Her co-authors were sociologists Jerry Park of Baylor University and Katherine Sorrell, a former postbaccalaureate fellow at Rice and current Ph.D. student at the University of Notre Dame.

They interviewed a scientifically selected sample of 275 participants, pulled from a survey of 2,198 tenured and tenure-track faculty in the natural and social sciences at 21 elite U.S. research universities. Only 15 percent of those surveyed view religion and science as always in conflict. Another 15 percent say the two are never in conflict, and 70 percent believe religion and science are only sometimes in conflict. Approximately half of the original survey population expressed some form of [religious identity](#), whereas the other half did not.

"Much of the public believes that as science becomes more prominent, secularization increases and religion decreases," Ecklund said. "Findings like these among elite scientists, who many individuals believe are most likely to be secular in their beliefs, definitely call into question ideas

about the relationship between secularization and science."

Many of those surveyed cited issues in the public realm (teaching of creationism versus evolution, stem cell research) as reasons for believing there is conflict between the two. The study showed that these individuals generally have a particular kind of religion in mind (and religious people and institutions) when they say that religion and science are in conflict.

The study identified three strategies of action used by these scientists to manage the religion-science boundaries and the circumstances that the two could overlap.

- **Redefining categories** - Scientists manage the science-religion relationship by changing the definition of religion, broadening it to include noninstitutionalized forms of spirituality.
- **Integration models** - Scientists deliberately use the views of influential scientists who they believe have successfully integrated their religious and scientific beliefs.
- **Intentional talk** - Scientists actively engage in discussions about the boundaries between science and religion.

"The kind of narrow research available on religion and science seems to ask if they are in conflict or not, when it should really ask the conditions under which they are in conflict," Ecklund said. "Our research has found that even within the same person, there can be differing views. It's very important to dispel the myth that people believe that religion and science either do or don't conflict. Our study found that many people have much more nuanced views."

These nuanced views often find their way into the classroom, according to those interviewed. One biologist, an atheist not part of any religious tradition, admitted that she makes a sincere effort

to present science such that "religious students do not need to compromise their own selves." Although she is not reconsidering her personal views on religion, she seeks out resources to keep her religious students engaged with science.

#### **Other findings:**

- Scientists as a whole are substantially different from the American public in how they view teaching "intelligent design" in public schools. Nearly all of the scientists - religious and nonreligious alike - have a negative impression of the theory of intelligent design.
- Sixty-eight percent of scientists surveyed consider themselves spiritual to some degree.
- Scientists who view themselves as spiritual/religious are less likely to see religion and science in conflict.
- Overall, under some circumstances even the most religious of scientists were described in very positive terms by their nonreligious peers; this suggests that the integration of religion and science is not so distasteful to all scientists.

Ecklund said the study's findings will go far in improving the public's perception of science. "I think it would be helpful for the public to see what scientists are actually saying about these topics, rather than just believe stereotypes," she said. "It would definitely benefit public dialogue about the relationship between [science](#) and religion."

Ecklund is the author of "[Science vs. Religion: What Scientists Really Think](#)," published by Oxford University Press last year.

Provided by Rice University

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