

Are the late Stephen Hawking's religious beliefs typical of U.K. scientists?

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Elaine Howard Ecklund. Credit: Jeff Fitlow/Rice University

The late Stephen Hawking famously didn't believe in God. Neither does the renowned Richard Dawkins. But is that typical for U.K. scientists?

In a new study, researchers from Rice University, Baruch College and West Virginia University find that scientists are indeed significantly less religious than the general population there.

In addition, U.K. scientists at elite universities are more likely to never attend religious services than those at less prestigious schools. The study also indicates biologists are more likely to never attend religious services than physicists.

"The Religiosity of Academic Scientists in the United Kingdom: Assessing the Role of Discipline and Department Status" utilizes data collected in a survey of biologists and physicists employed at elite and nonelite departments, as past research has suggested the distinction could be relevant in understanding differences in religiosity. The researchers were interested in how U.K. scientists, particularly elite scientists, compared to the general population with regard to religious beliefs.

The researchers found that while only 18 percent of people in the U.K. said they do not believe in God, 45 percent of U.K. scientists responded the same way. In addition, the researchers discovered that scientists in elite departments (a categorization based on the number of publications per department, published department rankings and insider knowledge) are about twice as likely to never attend religious services than scientists in nonelite departments.

Elaine Howard Ecklund, the Herbert S. Autrey Chair in Social Sciences, professor of sociology, director of Rice's Religion and Public Life Program and the study's lead author, observes that that elite scientists represent the leading edge of the secularizing effects of science.

"Individuals who are at the most elite institutions may disproportionately feel the cultural pressure to secularize," Ecklund said. "So, if those methods and mindset are inherently in conflict with religion, then these

successful scientists would experience the greatest erosion of religious faith."

Ecklund noted that such findings could also be a product of social forces rather than intellectual ones.

"This distinction could have an impact on how the public views scientists, in a national context where some minority groups are bringing challenges to teaching evolutionary theory, for example," she said.

"Elite scientists might express less religiosity because they assume that, as elite scientists, they are supposed to be or need to be less religious to fit a professional ideal," she added. "Because they might already be on the fringes of that professional ideal in the first place, nonelite scientists may feel less social and cultural pressure to further conform to it."

Study co-author Christopher P. Scheitle of West Virginia University's Department of Sociology and Anthropology said this might also help explain why U.K. biologists are more than 2½ times more likely to never attend [religious services](#) than British physicists.

"It is possible that U.K. biologists might be concerned that being seen as a more active participant in religion would violate some professional norm," said Jared Peifer, an assistant professor in the Department of Management at Baruch College's Zicklin School of Business.

Ecklund added: "This norm might result from the history of public conflict surrounding issues like evolution and stem cell research, which are most clearly connected to the biological sciences."

The researchers hope their work will help foster a better understanding of the social dynamics between religion and science beyond the traditional focus on the U.S.

More information: Elaine Howard Ecklund et al, The Religiosity of Academic Scientists in the United Kingdom: Assessing the Role of Discipline and Department Status, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (2018). [DOI: 10.1111/jssr.12552](https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12552)

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