

Natural scientists are less likely to believe in God than are social scientists

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Scientists in the social sciences are more likely to believe in God and attend religious services than are scientists in the natural sciences, according to a survey of 1,646 faculty members at elite research universities by a Rice University sociologist.

"Based on previous research, we thought that social scientists would be less likely to practice religion than natural scientists are, but our data showed just the opposite," said Elaine Howard Ecklund, a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Sociology at Rice. She will present the preliminary results of her study Aug. 14 at the annual meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion in Philadelphia.

"Science is often perceived as incompatible with religion and spirituality, but few have asked how scientists themselves think about religion," Ecklund said. "So I wanted to examine how academic scientists in the natural and social sciences understand the relationship of religion and spirituality to topics ranging from developing a research agenda to ethical decisions involving human subjects and interactions with students."

With a \$283,000 grant from the Templeton Foundation, Ecklund mailed \$15 and a request to participate in a 10-minute on-line survey to 2,148 faculty at 21 of the top U.S. research universities. She phoned those who did not take the survey to give them a chance to answer questions by phone. After seven weeks, more than 1,600 had completed the survey either on-line or by phone. The final response rate of 75 percent was "quite high" for social science research, Ecklund said.

The 36 questions on the survey examined a variety of topics, including religious beliefs, participation in religious services, spiritual practices, and the intersection of spiritual beliefs and research ethics.

When Ecklund compared faculty in the natural science disciplines of physics, chemistry and

biology with those in the social science disciplines of sociology, psychology, political science and economics, she found "distinct frameworks" for the ways in which they view religion and spirituality as well as how they make ethical decisions related to their research.

Nearly 38 percent of natural scientists surveyed said they did not believe in God, but only 31 percent of the social scientists gave that response.

Among each of the two general groups, one discipline stood out: Forty-one percent of the biologists and 27 percent of the political scientists said they don't believe in God.

"Now we must examine the nature of these differences," Ecklund said. "Many scientists see themselves as having a spirituality not attached to a particular religious tradition. Some scientists who don't believe in God see themselves as very spiritual people. They have a way outside of themselves that they use to understand the meaning of life."

Ecklund and colleagues are in the process of conducting longer interviews with some of the participants to explore issues in more depth. About 250 to 300 of the respondents will be selected randomly from those who completed the survey to participate in hour-long interviews conducted in person or by phone. They will be asked about deeper topics, such as the meaning of life, their understanding of the importance of religious beliefs in their lives and the perception of conflict between religion and science.

The in-depth interviews should be completed within a year, and then Ecklund plans to analyze the results and summarize her findings in a book as well as in several journal articles.

Source: Rice University

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