



The Clash Between Religion and Science

Most Scientists Are Nonbelievers, Study Finds

By LEE DYE

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Here's one reason why the war between science and religion cannot be resolved. Most scientists do not believe in God.

That's one of the findings in a huge study of leading scientists at the 21 top-rated research universities in the United States. And there's more:

- Almost 52 percent of the 1,646 scientists who participated in the study have no current religious affiliation compared with only 14 percent of the general population.
- More than 31 percent said they do not believe in God, and another 31 percent said they do not know if there is a God and there is no way to find out -- a whopping 62 percent of those surveyed.
- More than 56 percent did not attend a religious service during the entire year preceding the survey.
- Only 9.7 percent said they have "no doubts about God's existence."

The landmark study was conducted by sociologist Elaine Howard Ecklund at the University at Buffalo, and Christopher P. Scheitle of Pennsylvania State University. Ecklund said it's the first study in decades of the religious beliefs and practices of "elite academics," and it included 271 in-depth interviews with leading scientists, some of which lasted several hours.

She notes that the participants may not be representative of scientists as a whole, because they are the superachievers in their fields, men and women who are obsessed with science. But the findings are important, she said, because these are the people who shape the scientific attitudes and goals of the nation's academic communities.

The clash between science and religion is as old as science itself, but it seems especially heated -- and particularly important -- these days because of burning issues ranging from evolution to stem cell research. It may seem that scientists tend to shy away from discussing religion, but Ecklund did not find that to be the case. About 75 percent of the scientists she surveyed, through a professional polling organization, agreed to participate in the study, a surprisingly high number. None of their names are being released.

The question she most wanted to answer was pretty basic: Does the study of science drive a person away from religion? It does not, she said in an interview.

Nearly all the scientists who said they believe in God, and have a current affiliation with a church, were

raised in a home where religion was considered very important, she said. Thus, they conform to the same pattern seen in the population at large. As the twig is bent, so grows the tree.

Most of the scientists who believe in God have children, she said. And the 3,000 pages of transcribed interviews tell her something else.

"In my interviews, some scientists reclaimed the religion of their youth when they had children, and people in the general public do that as well," she said.

Unlike the general population, however, younger scientists tend to be more religious than older scientists. And although women generally tend to be more religious than men, that was not the case among the surveyed scientists.

"Gender did not play a role," Ecklund said.

She is convinced that her research shows that whether a scientist believes in God is determined primarily during childhood, and most of the scientists she studied came from homes where religion was not considered important. Her study, published in the current issue of the journal *Social Problems*, puts it this way:

"These data reveal that at least some part of the difference in religiosity between scientists and the general population is likely due simply to religious upbringing rather than scientific training or institutional pressure to be irreligious."

That is likely to be hotly debated in the years ahead, and there is a hint in her own research that suggests otherwise. The disciplines she studied include physics, chemistry, biology, sociology, economics, political science and psychology. Physicists did not lead the list of nonbelievers, which may be a bit surprising given the historic battles between the church and Galileo and Copernicus. Of all those surveyed, biologists were least likely to be religious, the study shows.

And who's on the hot seat these days? Biologists. Most of the controversial issues today involve various biological fields from stem cell research to evolution to genetic engineering. Physicists can relax. It's pretty much agreed now that Earth revolves around the sun. But biologists are in deep conflict with a society in which 90 percent claim some affiliation with a religious organization.

Ecklund said she doesn't know if the lack of religion among biologists is a cause or effect of that ongoing clash. One would guess it's probably both.

She made no attempt to define religion. Instead, she relied upon the terms and "predictors" that have been used in numerous polls of the general public.

So what is religion? And what is God?

No less than Albert Einstein grappled with those questions throughout his life. It is often said that he was religious, and believed in God, but his idea of God was quite different from the deity worshiped by so many today.

In his wonderful book on Einstein, Walter Isaacson tells of a dinner party in Berlin when Einstein was asked if he was religious.

"Yes, you can call it that," he replied. "Try and penetrate with our limited means the secrets of nature and you will find that, behind all the discernible laws and connections, there remains something subtle, intangible and inexplicable. Veneration for this force beyond anything that we can comprehend is my religion. To that extent I am, in fact, religious." He spent the rest of his life trying to explain what he really meant.

Einstein, by the way, was raised in a religious home.

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