

By Elaine Ecklund, PhD, sociologist at Rice University; from the Huffintgon Post

Why University Scientists Do Not Discuss Religion

There is strong evidence that religion is resurging among students on America's top university campuses. Yet, a large number of academic scientists firmly feel that they should not discuss religion in their classrooms. I have spent the last five years surveying nearly 1,700 natural and social scientists working at elite U.S. universities -- talking with 275 of them in-depth -- in an effort to understand their religious beliefs and practices, or lack thereof. As I traveled the country, I asked scientists about the role of religion within the university. Many scientists believe that religion has no legitimate place in the modern American academy; 54 percent mentioned the dangers that religion could bring to universities (and in particular to science) when it goes wrong. About 36 percent of scientists I talked with said they have a model of university life that does not allow any positive role for religious people, institutions and ideas. And they have few models for how scientists (with or without faith) might sustain productive interaction with or respond to religious people and ideas. In their models of the university, such people and ideas exist primarily as a threat to science.

U.S. scientists appear to have good reasons for these views. Americans are much less likely than people in other countries to accept that human beings developed from earlier species or that the universe began with a big explosion. According to a [recent report by the National Science Foundation](#), more Americans agree than disagree that "intelligent design" should be taught alongside evolution in public school science classes. It's easy to see why scientists at elite universities might view the academy as the only place in America where science is safe from the encroaching impact of religious conservatives.

But religion appears to be advancing on university campuses. There has been a rise in the number of religious studies departments, societies for the scholarly study of religion (in a variety of disciplines), and institutes devoted to dialogue between religion and science. Yet, perhaps because of how busy their research keeps them (the working hours per week for research university professors has steadily increased over the past 40 years) or their inherent lack of interest in religion, many elite scientists do not know about such efforts.

And since those scientists who are religious often keep their faith closeted, their nonreligious colleagues have little reason to think there is any place for religion in the academy, or any way for science and religion to be reconciled. This is too bad because many scientists who fear the encroaching impact of religion generally fear the most fundamentalist forms of it. And since their fellow scientists with religious views are reluctant to talk openly about their own beliefs, such stereotypes are rarely dispelled.

It is important to understand how scientists at the country's top schools view the place of religion in the academy because these schools form what scholars call an "organizational field" -- a group of organizations that influence one another in terms of ideologies, structure and practices. These schools accept and produce similar types of students and knowledge; the way in which scientists at these schools perceive the proper model of the

university is consequential for the broader institution of American higher education and the place of science (and religion) within it. If the scientists at elite universities fail to successfully engage with religion on their campuses, other American universities might follow suit. And if the current resurgence of religion on college campuses collides with persistently antireligious models of university life, might a collision or an explosion of some sort be inevitable?

My research shows that religious scientists often already feel embattled in their academic communities. They struggle with how public they should be about their faith commitments, given that so many of their colleagues are negative toward religion (evangelicalism and fundamentalism, in particular). Yet because religious scientists rarely talk candidly about their faith while in the university environment, they have not yet realized that a significant proportion of their colleagues, although not religious themselves, are open to talking and thinking about religion and matters of faith. In this way, both groups end up closeting faith and perpetuating the assumption that there is no safe place for intelligent discussions about religion on America's elite university campuses.

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