

1Review of “Science vs. Religion: What Scientists Really Think,” by Elaine Howard Ecklund.
Review by John H. Evans, University of California, San Diego

In 1916 James Leuba published a paper examining whether scientists are less religious than ordinary people. They were, and higher status scientists were even less religious than ordinary scientists. A similar study by Rodney Stark in 1963 reached the same conclusion.

Differentiating between types of scientists, in 1968 Lehman and Shriver found that social scientists were less religious than natural scientists, and this was replicated by others. In 1997 Larson and Witham replicated Leuba’s 1916 study, and got very similar results. The problem with this entire tradition is that it is not clear what these conclusions mean. Is the “God” of the scientists the same “God” that ordinary Americans worship? We need much more detail, and we have it in Ecklund’s book.

The book reports on a survey of over 1600 scientists at 21 elite American universities and in-depth interviews with 275 of these respondents. The surface level finding is similar to the findings going back to 1916: elite scientists are much less conventionally religious than the general population. Unlike some previous studies she does not see a strong natural science/social science divide. But, unlike the existing literature, we get better detail on what this surface level data means.

The first three chapters describe in much more detail three orientations toward religion by the elite scientists. There are the non-religious, the traditionally religious, and the spiritual scientists.

Here we start seeing the benefits of the in-depth research Ecklund did for this project. For example, whereas I can imagine scholars thinking that all of the “non-religious” scientists are actually camp followers of influential and pugnacious scientific atheist Richard Dawkins, we find out that perhaps 5% of elite scientists are like this. Most non-religious elite scientists are not virulently opposed to religion, but rather are much more like Max Weber in being “religiously unmusical,” “neither antireligious nor irreligious.” We learn other fascinating insights, such as the fact that the traditionally religious scientist keep their faith secret for fear of being looked down upon.

Unlike all of the existing literature, Ecklund’s book also takes on the related issue of how the scientists think the university should be set up in order to deal with the fact that there are religious students and irreligious scientists. Here we see that most scientists are believers in a variation of Stephen J. Gould’s “non-overlapping magisteria” theory where religion and science should be separate and ask distinct questions, but if students want to be religious on their own time, then they can do what they want.

If this were a comparative study of scientists and ordinary religious citizens, I am sure she would have discovered beliefs of the religious that hamper dialog with science. Being only a study of scientists, she identifies some problematic beliefs of scientists, such as the tendency to assume that all religious people are Protestant fundamentalists. She also calls for a discussion about scientism – the view that all questions can be answered with science – a position held by some scientists.

In sum, Ecklund's book is the capstone of this research tradition on the religiosity of scientists and the most ambitious in scope of any of its predecessors. I want to identify a series of questions that Ecklund's book has raised for me that are important for future research in this subfield. The first is that Ecklund makes much of scientists who claim to be "spiritual." There is a debate among sociologists of religion about what this means. Some consider "spiritual" to not be religious, some consider "spiritual" to mean anti-institutional but still religious. A future project should consider whether this discourse of "spirituality" is transcendent, how it is related to the beliefs of ordinary Americans, and why it seems a comfortable sentiment for elite scientists.

Second, while the purpose of Ecklund's study is to assess the possibility of dialog between religious people and scientists, along the way her book helps to overturn the simplistic cognitive incompatibility thesis that has dogged this literature. That is, from 1916 forward scholars have assumed that the spread of rationalistic science was going to kill off irrational religion because the two were both concerned with explaining facts about the natural world, were cognitively incompatible, and people could not hold incompatible notions in their heads. While Ecklund has helped to debunk this perspective, it was not her goal to develop an alternative theory for elite scientists' lesser religiosity. Future projects should be designed to examine why, if we reject the epistemological cognitive consistency argument, the elite scientists are still less religious than others. An explanation that has emerged after Ecklund's project began has focused upon science and religion being in competition for social influence, particularly over morality. This would predict that scientists are less traditionally religious because they fear the moral message of some

religious traditions, such as the anti-evolution arguments of conservative Protestants and the embryonic protection views of conservative Protestants and Catholics.

The scientists in Ecklund's book seem to think that they are producing morally neutral knowledge about the world, and their work has no cultural or moral message implicit within it. Religious people and scientists then seem to see their supposed conflict differently. A future study should examine the social sources of this idea of moral neutrality among scientists, and focus upon why scientists and religious people seem to be talking past each other. Future scholars should begin examination of these questions by starting with Ecklund's book.