

# Spirituality soars among scientists, study says

Scientists, especially social scientists, identify as spiritual, recent research indicates.

By Lea Plante  
(November 2, 2005)

Spirituality is important to a majority of scientists in the United States' elite research universities, says the researcher of a new study on religion. These scientists are confounding the prevailing opinion that academics aren't religious.

Researcher Elaine Howard Ecklund, a postdoctoral fellow at Rice University in Houston, surveyed more than 1,600 scientists from 21 elite research universities. Ecklund designed the survey to examine scientists' religious and spiritual beliefs as well as their practices.

"I really wanted a sense of what academic disciplines feel as a whole about issues related to religion and spirituality," said Ecklund, lead investigator of the two-year research project, which will be completed in 2006.

Ecklund said the scientists she surveyed are "the people who are really creating a lot of the knowledge that goes out about science and social science, public policy kinds of issues." She presented her initial research at the annual meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion in August.

Ecklund used indicators such as attendance at religious services to measure levels of religiosity; indicators like participation yoga, meditation, scripture reading and prayer were used to measure spirituality.

More than half of scientists in all disciplines identified themselves as spiritual to some degree, although not necessarily affiliated with a specific religion.

## **Natural science vs. social science**

Early study findings also indicate that more social scientists engage in religious practices than natural scientists.

Ecklund's study results indicate what she calls an "academic reversal," in which social scientists are more likely to be affiliated with organized religion than natural scientists. Her findings are in direct contrast with earlier studies, which indicated a lesser degree of religiosity among social scientists than natural scientists.

"She reverses the thing that we've all been basing a lot of our premises on — that is, that social scientists are the village atheists of the academy," said John Schmalzbauer, a sociologist at Missouri State University in Springfield.

In contrast with the natural sciences, the direct connection with humanity experienced in the social sciences may allow for a greater acceptance of encounters with religion or spirituality,

said Schmalzbauer. There is more openness, he said, in “areas of the social sciences that are more interpretive, that place more emphasis on meaning, and culture and worlds people inhabit, which makes them more cousins to the humanities.”

Interest in religion has increased among social scientists, Ecklund hypothesized, “because of changing culture in the social sciences, and a resurgence in the study of religion in some of these disciplines, sociology and political science in particular.” She cites the role that religious groups have played in recent U.S. elections: “You can’t study politics any more without taking religion seriously.”

Ecklund emphasized that her results are not final and that demographic factors appear to play a role in the higher rates of religiosity among social scientists.

### **More spirituality, less religion**

“There are a lot of people out there who don’t believe in God, that consider themselves to have some spirituality,” Ecklund

said, adding that it’s not the case that religion and spirituality are the same thing. “Rather than leaving religion altogether, many scientists have instead pieced together a personal spirituality,” Ecklund said.

“We discovered that even those who were not part of a specific Buddhist affiliation still considered Buddhist principles and practices an important part of their understanding of spirituality,” Ecklund said. One scientist who participated in the research said he meditates “to feel that I am a human being and all that entails.”

The idea of being spiritual — not religious — is increasingly popular among the scientific community as well as in American culture at large, said David Yamane, an assistant sociology professor at Wake Forest University. The spirituality label is safer for cultural and intellectual elites who value autonomy, he said, “because they can pursue it largely on their own terms.” Many scientists who are politically liberal don’t want to associate with religion because of its conservative valence today, Yamane said.

Historically, there are no boundary disputes between spirituality and science, unlike religion and science, he added. “Hence, today, social scientists — to the extent that they orient themselves to the sacred — may be even more attached to spirituality than natural scientists,” said Yamane.

The study results reflect the search by academics for meaning outside of science, said Ecklund. Spirituality is “a way to remind oneself that there is something outside the utilitarian entrance to the academy,” she said.

“They’re managing each project, getting grants, publishing articles, teaching and they need something to feel like they are not just cogs in a big machine,” Ecklund said, adding that scientists seem to want to keep their research and their spiritual and religious lives separate. “But when it comes to teaching, things are more fuzzy,” she said. “Particularly in the social sciences where we’re discussing society and how people behave — the students will bring up these issues, and the faculty member will have to figure out how to engage.”

By not taking into account a population’s religious or spiritual experience, the social scientist’s concept of the group will be incomplete, said Carole Rayburn, a clinical psychologist in Silver Springs, Md., who also holds a master’s degree in divinity.

“If sociologists who are dealing with whole populations leave out the religious or theological side, then they are looking at a more barren, less warm, less sanguine situation. They are not getting perhaps the full idea of what it means to be caring for humanity, caring for others,” she said. Rayburn said she believes there is an essential interplay between the social sciences and the observable world, a theory she called “theobiology.”

“Every scientist believes in something intangible,” said Rustum Roy, Professor of Science Technology, and Society Emeritus at Pennsylvania State University. “How can a physicist come up with his real dreams about string theory if he doesn’t go inward?”

Roy said that on a fundamental level, religion is about taking action. In contrast, he said, “science demands no behavior toward society or other humans.”

### **Old ways no longer work**

“Finding ways to incorporate spirituality in research is one of the biggest challenges we face,” said Margaret Benefiel, a lecturer in interdepartmental studies at Andover Newton Theological School in Newton, Mass.

There are prescribed research methodologies for scientists, said Benefiel. “Often when they follow the standard research methods, they find that there is not space for spirituality,” she said. “We can’t just use the old template of one research methodology that worked for science 50 years ago, that doesn’t work when we’re looking at spiritual issues,” said Benefiel, also CEO of ExecutiveSoul.com, an organization that trains leaders to make better decisions through spiritual leadership.

“I think in the 1950s, it would have been hard for a sociologist to use their own religious experiences to give them insight into data,” said Schmalzbauer. “I think that would have been less acceptable then than it is now.”

Ecklund is now conducting several hundred one-hour-long interviews with a subset of the respondents to explore the religious and spiritual tendencies of scientists in greater depth. Following the interview phase of the research, Ecklund said she plans an in-depth analysis of scientists’ affinity to spiritual and religious practices.

“My sense so far with this group is that spirituality may be more important to them than traditional measures of religiosity, and that is in just the beginning stages of analyzing the survey,” said Ecklund.

*Lea Plante is a freelance writer living in Quincy, Mass.*