



Are Religious Americans Opposed to Science?

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Religion and science are sometimes portrayed as polar opposites – with pundits pointing to fights over the teaching of evolution in schools or media episodes such as Republican politician Marco Rubio’s suggestion that the age of the earth is up for debate. But America’s many vibrant religious traditions and beliefs are often more nuanced than oversimplified stereotypes pretend. My research looks at the attitudes of many kinds of religious believers, and focuses in detail on the specific ways conservative Protestants challenge modern scientific claims.

What Religious Americans Believe about Science

Many of the largest and most established U.S. religious traditions have little history of opposition to science. Liberal Protestants separated from conservative Protestants in part over support for modern ways of understanding the world, including science. Most Jewish traditions have no conflicts with science, and neither do Catholics in most realms of belief. The story is somewhat different for the conservative Protestant fundamentalists and evangelicals who today make up about a quarter of the U.S. population. They have long challenged certain scientific claims – in particular, the theory of evolution and scientific estimates of the age of the Earth.

Using nationally representative survey data, I recently compared the beliefs about science of the most conservative U.S. Protestants with the beliefs of Americans who say they do not participate in any religion. Using a strict definition, I defined conservative Protestants as the approximately 11% of the population who claim affiliation with a relevant denomination, attend church regularly, and take the Bible as literal truth. Here are some of my key findings:

- When we adjust for education and other important factors, conservative Protestants turn out to be just as likely as non-religious people to understand scientific methods and know scientific facts. They are also just as likely to have majored in science or work in a scientific occupation. Scholars have established that elite scientists who work at top U.S. research universities are less religious than other Americans. But ordinary people working in most occupations share the same beliefs as their neighbors and co-workers. Adherence to conservative religion as such does not reduce knowledge of science or the likelihood of holding a scientifically-based job.
- In a few areas where conservative Protestant theologies and scientific findings differ, religious conservatives are likely to believe their religion and depart from the scientific consensus – for example, about the origins of human beings or the age of the Earth. But that’s it. On other issues, conservative believers usually do not question scientific facts.

- Some say it is logically inconsistent to accept scientific methods and findings in some areas but not others. But logical consistency is not typical for most people most of the time. Academics may prize logic, but most people hold views that vary by the situations they find themselves in at different times.

Moral Turf is the Crux of the Matter

The key conflicts between conservative Protestantism and science are about values, not facts. Scientists believe their work is “value-free,” but many in the public do not agree. Indeed, conservative Protestants have always focused on moral messages in science. For example, William Jennings Bryan, the famed defender of creationism at the Scopes “monkey trial” of the 1920s, opposed evolution not just for contradicting the Bible, but also because he thought Darwinism had ruined the morals of German youth and helped to bring about World War I.

Today’s conservative Protestants, are less likely than non-religious Americans to grant scientists legitimate authority in public debates. Direct moral differences may be at work, as in conflicts over stem cell research. But differences over global warming, for example, do not seem to be similarly grounded in theology or passages found in the Bible. In that instance, conservative religious people may simply believe that scientists should not have authority in the public sphere – on any issue. They are skeptical about policy arguments that invoke scientific authority.

Other research I have conducted shows that opposition to the moral sway of scientists has grown in the past 25 years, because conservative Protestantism and science are invading one another’s turf. Back in the 1970s, debates invoking science were about the physical world and issues such as nuclear weapons. But after that, public debates started focusing on matters such as organ transplantation, the end of life and artificial technologies to influence reproduction – all realms that have been central to religion. Conservative Protestants also became more politically mobilized, and moved into debates such as the regulation of abortion.

Pinpointing the Important Conflicts

My research dispels myths by showing that religious people in the United States usually do not question science. Adherents of most faiths accept science, even when it looks at things differently than religious world views. Conservative Protestants are an exception, but even they only directly challenge a few factual scientific claims.

Major clashes have to do with who should shape society’s morals, and who can claim authority in political debates. Conservative Protestants have grown more willing to challenge science on that score, even when facts are not disputed. Scientists worry when some religious Americans dismiss findings on issues such as global warming. But from the perspective of conservative Protestants, scientists or leaders invoking science too often make overweening claims. Maybe the core differences have to do with long-sacred issues about human life and death, but conservative Protestant skepticism about scientific claims in those areas can spill over into a more general willingness to doubt science and scientists’ involvement in any and all public debates.

We should sort out what really is at issue in different realms, and avoid oversimplified assumptions about “religion” versus “science.” To move toward more productive public debates, Americans need to lower the temperature and be clear about exactly where core religious beliefs do, and do not, clash with consensual

scientific views.

Read more in John H. Evans, "The Growing Social and Moral Conflict between Conservative Protestantism and Science," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 52, no. 2 (2013), and "Epistemological and Moral Conflict between Religion and Science," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 50, no. 4 (2011): 707-727.