



Exposure to science, perspectives on science and religion, and religious commitment in young adulthood



Jeremy E. Uecker ^{a, *}, Kyle C. Longest ^b

^a Baylor University, United States

^b Furman University, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 27 June 2016

Received in revised form 8 November 2016

Accepted 9 January 2017

Available online 12 January 2017

Keywords:

Science

Religiosity

Evolution

Secularization

Post-secularism

Youth

ABSTRACT

Social scientists know very little about the consequences of exposure to scientific knowledge and holding different perspectives on science and religion for individuals' religious lives. Drawing on secularization and post-secular theories, we develop and test several hypotheses about the relationships among exposure to scientific knowledge, perspectives on religion and science, and religious commitment using panel data from the National Study of Youth and Religion. Our findings indicate that religious faith is strongest among young adults who: (1) accommodate scientific knowledge into their religious perspective, or (2) reject scientific knowledge that directly contradicts their religious beliefs about the origins of the world. Young adults are also more likely to have lower religious commitment when they view science and religion as independent institutions, lending support to secularization ideas about how social differentiation secularizes individuals. We further find that mere exposure to scientific knowledge, in terms of majoring in biology or acknowledging conflict between the teachings of religion and science, is usually not sufficient to undermine religious commitment.

© 2017 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

The relationship between science and religion continues to be debated in public and scholarly discourse. Much of the discourse in both arenas might be described as adhering to the “warfare thesis”—that science and religion make competing truth claims and cannot both be authoritative (Evans and Evans, 2008). This perspective is voiced by popular scientific elites and (usually conservative Protestant) religious elites, neither of whom are representative of their respective groups, but who nevertheless make strong claims about the incompatibility of scientific and religious perspectives (Scheitle and Ecklund, 2015). Prominent scientists, on one hand, sometimes position their work—and science itself—as a direct challenge to religion. For example, according to Stephen Weinberg, a Nobel laureate in theoretical physics, “the teaching of modern science is corrosive of religious belief, and I’m all for that! One of the things that in fact has driven me in my life, is the feeling that this is one of the great social functions of science—to free people from superstition” (Freedom from Religion Foundation, 2000). Similarly, several creationist organizations have re-published an article on their websites that claims, “The doctrines of creation and evolution are so strongly divergent that reconciliation is totally impossible. Theistic evolutionists attempt to integrate the two doctrines, however such syncretism reduces the message of the Bible to insignificance” (Gitt, 1995).

Although this warfare narrative only characterizes a portion of scientists and religious Americans (Eckland and Park, 2009; Baker, 2012b), it is not only elites who hold this perspective. In his ethnography of evangelical Christian high schools, Guhin

* Corresponding author. Baylor University, Department of Sociology, One Bear Place #97326, Waco, TX 76798, United States.

E-mail address: jeremy_uecker@baylor.edu (J.E. Uecker).

(2016) reports that “the threat that [belief in] evolution would lead to nihilistic atheism was a litany I heard continuously, and for many [being a creationist] was the mark of Christian faith itself.” Sociologists have also often adhered to a version of this warfare perspective. Secularization theorists have often pinpointed scientific knowledge as one factor that ultimately undermines religious faith and secularizes at the societal, organizational, and individual level [Weber (1946); Freud (1961); Berger (1967); Wilson (1982); see Tschannen (1991) for a helpful systematization of classic secularization arguments, including scientization].

More recent secularization arguments (e.g., Bruce, 2002; Norris and Inglehart, 2004) have shied away from this explanation, however, as religion—especially in the United States—has proven resilient, at least at the aggregate level, to scientific progress and remains an active force among individuals and in public life (Habermas, 2008). Further, post-secular theorists have suggested that religion's diminished functional role and increasingly individualized nature do not mean that it is less influential in people's personal lives (Habermas, 2008); these processes operate at different levels (i.e., societal and individual) that are related but distinct (Dobbelaere, 1981). Moreover, sociologists of religion have noted that this classic “warfare thesis” does not accurately reflect how individuals accommodate both scientific and religious beliefs in their thinking (Evans and Evans, 2008). Most Americans disagree that religion and science are incompatible (Baker, 2012b), and the majority of college students view the relationship between religion and science as one of either independence (i.e., examining mutually exclusive aspects of reality) or of collaboration (Scheitle, 2011b). Only 37% of academic scientists at elite US universities say there is conflict between religion and science (Ecklund and Park, 2009). Indeed, individuals' perspectives on religion and science are more complex and varied than the conflict perspective would suggest (Longest and Smith, 2011; Scheitle, 2011b; O'Brien and Noy, 2015). About one in five Americans have “post-secular” perspectives that view both religion and science favorably (O'Brien and Noy, 2015). These findings are consistent with post-secular theories that emphasize how individuals draw from multiple sources—including religious and scientific explanations—to form their worldview (Casanova, 2010).

The warfare or conflict perspective also does not accurately reflect how major religious leaders (and their traditions) navigate these issues. Pope Francis, for example, has endorsed the compatibility of religious faith and belief in evolution: “Evolution in nature is not inconsistent with the notion of creation, because evolution requires the creation of beings that evolve” (Tharoor, 2014). Kathleen Jefferts Schori, a former Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church (USA) and also the holder of a Ph.D. in oceanography, went even further to embrace the theory of evolution: “I simply find it a rejection of the goodness of God's gifts to say that all of this evidence [in support of evolution] is to be refused because it does not seem to accord with a literal reading of one of the stories in Genesis” (Jefferts Schori, 2005).

Though the relationship between religion and science has received a great deal of attention, very little longitudinal research has focused on how science beliefs impact the religious lives of individuals over time [see Scheitle (2011a) for one exception]. Most of the research examines how religious characteristics shape science beliefs and knowledge, often with a focus on those who identify with conservative Protestant denominations that believe the Bible (and the creation account found in its first chapter) is to be interpreted literally (Ellison and Musick, 1995; Sherkat, 2011; Evans, 2011, 2013; Evans and Feng, 2013; Johnson et al., 2015). Others have challenged the “warfare thesis” by detailing the persistence of religiosity among science professors (Gross and Simmons, 2009; Ecklund and Scheitle, 2007; Ecklund et al., 2008; Ecklund and Park, 2009; Ecklund, 2010; Ecklund et al., 2011), by identifying classes or types of individuals that hold both scientific and religious perspectives on the world (O'Brien and Noy, 2015), or by showing that many individuals find religion and science to be either compatible or even mutually reinforcing (Longest and Smith, 2011; Scheitle, 2011b). Thus, while these studies show the forces that may shape perspectives on religion and science, we have very little direct evidence linking these beliefs to individuals' subsequent religiosity.

To address this, we analyze panel survey data from the National Study of Youth and Religion (N = 1831 and 1292) to assess differences at ages 23–28 in religious service attendance, religious salience, and religious affiliation—three of the most-often used measures of religious commitment in contemporary religion research—based on one's educational characteristics, religion and science perspectives, and beliefs about evolution at ages 18–23. In so doing, we ask and answer two research questions: (1) How does exposure to scientific knowledge shape subsequent religious characteristics, and (2) How do beliefs about religion and science—and their potential conflict or compatibility—shape subsequent religious characteristics?

The transition to adulthood, as this time of life is commonly called by social scientists, is an ideal time to study the relationship between religion and science because religious commitments are thought to be in flux, as are understandings of science and educational trajectories. The transition to adulthood is believed to be a time of identity exploration wherein individuals develop a way of making sense of the world (Arnett, 2004). Arnett (2004:166) suggests, “It is during emerging adulthood that people address worldview questions most directly, and it is during emerging adulthood that most people reach at least an initial resolution to their worldview questions.” Young adulthood is furthermore considered to be a time of heightened religious change, typically in the direction of lower religiosity (Uecker et al., 2007; Smith and Snell, 2009). From this perspective, religious commitments are very much in flux, and ideas about science could be influential in shaping religious trajectories. Indeed, if science knowledge and beliefs do shape religious commitments, young adulthood—when education is typically completed—is likely the time to identify these effects. We now turn our attention to developing a series of hypotheses about the relationships among exposure to scientific knowledge, science and religion beliefs, and religious outcomes.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5047067>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5047067>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)