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Evangelicals and Science in Conversation — A One-Way Street?

Evangelical Christians who seek a better public conversation with elite science had better know in advance that it is a one-way street.

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From time to time, a column in a newspaper is more revealing than its author probably intended it to be. That seems to be the case with “Myths Widen the Science-Religion Divide” by Elaine Howard Ecklund, published in the July 19, 2010 edition of *USA Today*. In her essay, Professor Ecklund suggests that science and religion can enter into a constructive dialogue. But a closer look at her essay reveals that this dialogue, at least as it involves most Christians, is a one-way street.

Elaine Howard Ecklund teaches sociology at Rice University and is the author of a recently released book, *Science vs Religion: What Scientists Really Think*. In her *USA Today* column, Professor Ecklund argues, based on her extensive research, that “the conversation between science and religion is besieged by misunderstanding and myths on both sides.”

As she continues her argument:

Some of the assumptions of the present science-religion debates simply do not hold up under the weight of research data. Dispelling myths about religious and scientific communities could lay the groundwork for a new kind of dialogue — one based more on serious thinking and scholarship than caricature.

Any serious person will prefer serious thinking and scholarship to caricature, and Professor Ecklund has indeed provided much food for thought. Her column is interesting, but her book is far more important and substantial.

In *USA Today*, Professor Ecklund attempted to correct the view she says is held by many religious believers — that scientists are predominately secular and antagonistic to theistic faith. Many believers, she says, “hold scientists at arm’s length, believing that they are all atheists who are interested in attacking religion and the religious community.”

In conducting her research, Professor Ecklund surveyed 1,700 natural and social scientists and conducted interviews with 275 of them. Her research is most interesting as it focuses on “elite” scientists who have particular influence. In order to set the record straight, in her column she shared some of the data from her research. She reports that 30 percent of scientists are atheists. She concedes that this is “a much larger percentage than the general population.”

This is what we can only call a gross understatement. According to the authoritative study undertaken by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, about 5 percent of Americans report themselves as not believing in *any* deity, but only a quarter of those actually call themselves atheists. In other words, the scientists Professor Ecklund surveyed reported themselves to be atheists at a rate at least six times the national average — and perhaps at a rate even much higher than that.

She says that “fewer than 6% of atheist scientists are working against religion,” but the reader is left to wonder exactly



what this is supposed to mean. Presumably, it means that few elite scientists follow the model of Richard Dawkins in spending a great deal of their time attempting to argue against the danger of theism. That certainly does not leave the rest friendly to belief in God . . . or to believers.

Professor Ecklund reports that about half of all scientists report themselves to be religious in some sense, and some 20 percent are involved in some house of worship. “Top scientists are sitting in our country’s churches, temples, and mosques,” she asserts.

Well, a closer look at her research indicates that these “top scientists” are rather thin on the ground in more conservative sectors of Christianity. Consider her report that “there are 14 times more self-identified evangelicals in the general population than among the scientists at our nation’s top universities.”

In her book, Professor Ecklund provides a wealth of data and analysis that, in general, casts her column in a quite different light. For example, she reports that “scientists in general are much less likely than are members of the general population to identify as part of a traditional religion.” Fully 50 percent of the scientists she surveyed reported themselves as having no religious affiliation, compared to 16 percent of the general population.

Only about 2 percent of these scientists identified as evangelical Christians. Far more reported themselves as Jewish, but defined more by tradition than theistic belief.

“On the whole, scientists tend to view themselves as religiously liberal,” she acknowledges. And in another understated passage, she reports this: “When we hold this liberalism alongside the fact that scientists at elite U.S. research universities are the least likely to be evangelicals (at least to label themselves so), *and* that evangelicalism is heavily represented in the general population, we see that scientists who care about translating science to a general public might need a lot of help to do so effectively.” You think?

She writes that “it is virtually impossible to find a group of Americans who do *not* believe in God,” but she concedes that only 36 percent of these elite scientists “have some form of a belief in God.” That would seem to leave 64 percent without any such belief.

Scientists who do have some belief in God tend to have what Professor Ecklund describes as a “closeted faith.” She explains that “religious scientists generally tried to keep their faith to themselves because of the perception that other faculty in their departments think poorly of religious people and religious ideas.” The result is “a strong culture of suppression.”

Well, if Professor Ecklund was trying to counter the “myth” that science is basically secular and antagonistic to theistic belief, she had better hope that people read her *USA Today* article and not her book.

In the other angle of her argument, Professor Ecklund reports in her article that “scholars are also finding that evangelical Christianity is not as detrimental to acquiring scientific knowledge as they once thought.”

Really? In both the book and her article, this argument seems to come down to the fact that the price of being considered “not as detrimental to acquiring scientific knowledge as . . . once thought” is the embrace of evolution and the relinquishment of objections to human embryonic stem cell research.

When it comes to the big public battles over science and faith, this professor clearly sides with the scientists. In fact, both the book and her article are cast as an effort to help scientists make their arguments more plausible (and to protect their research funding) in the context of a nation with so many evangelical believers.

The great obstacle — evangelical parents. Professor Ecklund laments that “many young Americans may not be learning what they should about science because their religious upbringing poses a barrier.” In her book she argues that many younger Americans “are not learning what they should about science because their parents’ quarrels and impasses are holding them back from studying topics like evolution or from pursuing science careers (out of fear that such pursuits are incompatible with their religious beliefs).”

Once again, if Professor Ecklund hopes that younger Americans will think otherwise, she had better hope that these

kids don't read her book.

We are in debt to Professor Ecklund for her massive and persuasive research as documented and presented in her book, even if her *USA Today* article seems to be a deliberate attempt to tell only part of the story.

Her research leaves us with much to consider, but one big message comes through loud and clear — evangelical Christians who seek a better public conversation with elite science had better know in advance that it is a one-way street.

I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler.

Elaine Howard Ecklund, "[Myths Widen the Science-Religion Divide](#)," *USA Today*, Monday, July 19, 2010.

Elaine Howard Ecklund, *Science vs Religion: What Scientists Really Think* (Oxford University Press, 2010). [or [Kindle edition](#)]

"[Not All Nonbelievers Call Themselves Atheists](#)," Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, April 2009.

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