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Review

Rethinking "religion" and "science" to cultivate mutual trust in the United States

Kimberly Rios[1] and Cameron D. Mackey[2]

In many Western societies such as the United States, "science" is considered a polarizing and controversial topic along political and religious lines. Although religious and politically conservative individuals are generally less trusting of science than non-religious and politically liberal individuals, we argue that there are more nuances to religion, science, and the religion-science relationship than is typically assumed. Stereotyping religious individuals as "anti-science" and scientists as "anti-religion" is both inaccurate and has the potential to exacerbate divisions between religious and scientific communities. By contrast, addressing misconceptions about who most religious people are and what they tend to believe, as well as who scientists are and what "science" entails, may cultivate both public trust in science and scientists' willingness to welcome multiple identities and perspectives among their ranks.

Addresses
[1] University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, United States
[2] University of Wisconsin at Madison, United States

Corresponding author: Rios, Kimberly (kmrios@illinois.edu)

In the United States, religion and politics have long been known as two of the most controversial topics to discuss at the dinner table [1] or in the classroom [2]. Americans' reluctance to engage in religion-related conversations continues to rise; 41 % of respondents in a recent Pew Research Center survey claimed it is best to avoid talking about religion at all if someone disagrees with you, versus 33 % in 2020 [3]. Even in 2019, just 24 % and 17 % of Americans reported being "very comfortable" discussing religion and politics, respectively, with people they do not know well [4]. These proportions are likely lower now, given the spike in discomfort surrounding religious disagreements [3]. Additionally, religion and political conservatism show more overlap than perhaps ever before [5,6], to the point that people who are both religious and liberal or both non-religious and conservative experience feelings of identity conflict [7].

Should science be added to the list of taboo discussion topics? After all, certain scientific issues (e.g., stem cell research, climate change, evolution, vaccinations) may conflict with people's identities or belief systems, creating challenges for deliberation in a democratic society [8]. In a study of undergraduates in a bioethics course, for example, religious students reported being less comfortable than non-religious students when learning about abortion and physician-assisted suicide. Furthermore, non-liberal students were less comfortable than liberal students when learning about abortion [9]. As with religion and politics, science has become increasingly divisive [10,11] and seen as increasingly intertwined with other identities (e.g., secularism, liberalism) [12] among the American public.

Despite the controversial discourse surrounding religion, science, and politics, there is more nuance to these belief systems and the relationships between them than members of the public typically assume [10,13]. Additionally, liberals' and conservatives' views on science are impacted by the same cognitive and social underpinnings (e.g., whether their preferred political party purposefully fosters distrust in science) [14]. Overlooking the nuances in religious, scientific, and political beliefs may fuel misconceptions that widen the gulf between religious and scientific communities and contribute to both communities' polarization. By contrast, addressing misconceptions about science and religion has the potential to foster trust in science among religious people who might initially be skeptical, as well as increase openness to including religious populations and perspectives in scientific spaces. Below, we review the existing literature on the nature and possible consequences of such misconceptions. Our focus will be on the US, given the extreme polarization of science along ideological lines in that context [10–12].

Misconceptions about religion and science

Recent work demonstrates that scientists at elite universities and research institutions in the US tend to

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assume most religious individuals are evangelical or conservative Protestants [15]. Evangelical or conservative Protestants are the Christian groups who show elevated rates of science skepticism, compared to other religious and non-religious groups [10,16]. However, evangelical Protestants comprise only 23 % of US adults and 37 % of the US Christian population [6]. Assuming that most Christians are evangelical Protestants may contribute to broader stereotypes about how religion relates to confidence in science, fueling the misperception that most Christians (and religious people in general) harbor distrust toward science, or that most Christians (and religious people in general) see science as conflicting with their beliefs [17]. In fact, the relationship between religiosity and trust in science largely depends on time period [15] and sociocultural context [13,18]. Moreover, religious belief predicts *greater* perceptions of compatibility between religion and science, whereas belief in science predicts *lower* perceptions of religion-science compatibility [19]. Therefore, contrary to many scientists' presumptions, religious individuals in the US are not necessarily skeptical of science, nor do they necessarily reject science as being misaligned with their faith.

Across several Western societies, scientists are perceived as politically liberal [20] and non-religious [21,22] by members of the public. Unlike the generalizations about religious people and their trust in science, stereotypes of scientists as liberal and nonreligious are largely accurate. In a survey of biologists and physicists, the percentages of respondents from the US, the UK, and France who reported some religious affiliation or claimed to be at least a slightly religious person were all less than 40 % [23]. Additionally, certain scientific fields (e.g., social and personality psychology) are disproportionately more liberal than conservative [24,25]. Despite the relative accuracy of religious and political stereotypes about scientists, they still may be exaggerated. Some research has shown that scientists who are religious [26,27] or politically conservative [25] tend to conceal their belief-based identities in professional contexts. Such concealment, and the discrimination that some religious and/or politically conservative scientists report experiencing [28—30], could lead members of the scientific community to think that religion and political conservatism are even less prevalent within their field than is truly the case.

Finally, non-scientists — especially those who are religious — sometimes hold erroneous views of what science is and what being a scientist entails. Prior work has shown that although science professions can often involve collaborating with and helping other people (i.e., *communal* activities), science is stereotyped as a largely solitary, self-interested (i.e., *agentic*) endeavor [31]. In one of our own studies, Christian university students saw natural science careers as more agentic than communal, and as more agentic than non-religious university students saw these same careers [32]. Notably, many religious traditions are more closely associated with communality than agency [33]. As a possible consequence, religious individuals may be reluctant to pursue careers in or trust findings from scientific fields that they see as at odds with communal values [34]. Furthermore, to the extent that scientists themselves perceive science as more agentic than communal and religion as more communal than agentic, these perceptions could inadvertently foster discrimination against religious individuals within the sciences.

How to address these misconceptions

Trust in science among US Americans has declined markedly since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, though there was a slight uptick between 2023 and 2024 [11]. As noted earlier, science is also portrayed as divisive along both religious and political lines [12], which does little to bolster trust given that institutions perceived as espousing political stances are often met with more skepticism [35]. We have argued that the religious and scientific communities may be less polarized than members of both communities tend to assume. Addressing misconceptions about religion and science requires a multifaceted approach, considering not only how to cultivate public trust in science but also what the scientific community can do to make space for different groups and perspectives [36]. That is, the problem (distrust and polarization of science) and solution (increasing trust and engagement) apply to scientists and the public alike.

Increasing awareness that religion and science are each more ideologically diverse than is commonly assumed could be an initial step toward cultivating mutual trust. For instance, if scientists were exposed to information about how being religious is not always (or even usually) synonymous with being evangelical or "anti-science" [15] and how most religious individuals see their beliefs as compatible rather than in conflict with science [17,19], they may become more open to accommodating religious people and groups within the scientific community. Indeed, a recent experiment showed that biology professors rate PhD program applicants who disclose having gone on a Christian mission trip as less hireable and competent than applicants who do not disclose a religious affiliation [37]. But might these biology professors have been more supportive of the Christian applicant if they knew that most religious people do not see science as interfering with their beliefs, nor do most religious people reject scientific principles and findings? Consistent with this possibility, in a study from our lab, non-religious individuals who read a purportedly real news article about how many US scientists identify as Christian and see science as compatible with their faith subsequently rated Christians as more competent in science [17]. Furthermore,

scientists themselves could consider reframing discussions of "anti-science" movements to acknowledge that the majority of people do not hold these views [36].

Highlighting the religious diversity within science may be more challenging, given that scientists at universities and research institutes largely are non-religious [23,25]. The widespread stereotypes of scientists as secular [20–22], despite being mostly accurate, have the potential to further silence other perspectives and hence perpetuate stereotypes that are more extreme than reality [38]. Nevertheless, one means of mitigating such stereotypes is to emphasize that there are likely more religious scientists than the public might assume. In fact, within the US, some religious groups (e.g., Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, Buddhist) are *overrepresented* in science relative to their proportions in the general population [39]. Even learning about the representation of these non-Christian groups in scientific fields may encourage engagement among Christians, insofar as Christians see said groups as sharing a common "religious" identity [40]. Religious individuals who learn that scientists are more similar to themselves than they initially thought may then develop a greater propensity to trust and engage with science [22,41].

Such interventions may be more difficult to implement in the context of political views, as science has become increasingly ideologically divisive within the US [10–12]. For example, simply reading that many scientists are conservative or that prominent conservatives trust science does little to increase politically conservative individuals' trust in science [42]. However, in one study, politically conservative participants who watched a video of Donald Trump endorsing the COVID-19 vaccine subsequently reported greater vaccination intentions than did both those who watched a video of Joe Biden endorsing the vaccine and those in a neutral (no endorsement) condition [43]. Thus, interventions aimed at bolstering conservatives' trust in science may need to be especially vivid or focused on specific scientific issues to be effective.

Finally, it may be important to broaden conceptions not only of who religious people and scientists are, but also of *what* religion and science are. For example, as discussed earlier, people often assume that science involves agentic values, which are at odds with the communal values embraced by many religious groups [34]. However, both science and religion can be construed as some combination of agency and communality. Interventions that make salient the common ground between science and religion could increase both religious individuals' trust in science and scientists' perceptions that religious individuals are open to scientific views. In one representative study, participants who believed that religion involves protecting the planet — a belief suggesting agency (humans' ability to impact the environment) and communality (prosocial behavior) — reported greater confidence in science [44]. Similarly, framing climate change (a scientific issue) as central to patriotism (which involves the communal notion of attachment to one's country) boosted pro-environmental behaviors in a multinational sample [45].

Although communal values are embedded in various religions [34], political conservatism — which emphasizes nationalism, sometimes at the expense of cooperation across national contexts — may be perceived as incompatible with communality and universalism (i.e., the notion that anyone can engage in science regardless of identity) [46]. As a result, politically conservative individuals may not exhibit more confidence in science after thinking about science as communal. Supporting this possibility, an intervention emphasizing that scientists aim to "preserve the world" and protect the world from "natural and social threats" did not increase conservatives' trust in science [42]. However, some research has shown that political conservatives tend to trust "production science" (i.e., science that provides new innovations for economic production) more than "impact science" (i.e., science that identifies public health and environmental impacts of economic production) [47]. Thus, perhaps scientists would do well to focus on their work's economic consequences when discussing it with conservative audiences, a possibility that should be tested empirically.

It remains to be seen whether scientists themselves respond positively to information that "religious" and "scientific" values may be more similar than meets the eye. That said, recent findings demonstrate that receptivity to alternative viewpoints (i.e., intellectual humility) predicts academic social scientists' positive evaluations of religion-related research [12]. Thus, it seems plausible that scientists — at least those who exercise intellectual humility — are also able to revise their perceptions of religious individuals and communities in the face of compelling evidence.

Conclusion

As we have argued throughout this piece, the relationship between religion and science is more complex than many Americans within religious and scientific communities assume. Encouraging awareness of such complexities could ultimately reduce the prevalence of overgeneralizations about both religious people (e.g., as anti-science, politically conservative, and evangelical) and scientists (e.g., as politically liberal and non-religious). Furthermore, appreciating the differences *within* and not just between religious and scientific communities may boost religious groups' trust and engagement in science, as well as scientists' willingness to incorporate religious community members into their ranks. Perhaps, then, science and religion need not be

such divisive topics at the dinner table (and in society) after all.

Author contribution

Rios and Mackey conceptualized, wrote, and edited the paper.

Declaration of competing interest

There are no competing interests to disclose.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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* of special interest
** of outstanding interest

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19. ** This paper shows that across three countries, people who are more religious see religion and science as compatible, whereas people who believe strongly in science see religion and science as conflicting.

20. * This paper uses both empirical studies and a large-scale Twitter analysis to show that scientists are stereotyped as politically liberal, and people tend to trust scientists whose presumed political ideologies align with their own.

23. * This study examines biologists' and physicists' religious beliefs and beliefs about religion-science compatibility in eight national contexts, and finds that scientists in Western countries generally are less religious and see religion and science as less compatible.

36. * This paper reviews several reasons that people may reject scientific evidence (e.g., perceived source credibility, social identity), as well as what scientists themselves can do to increase public acceptance of science.

37. * This paper shows that evangelical Christian college students in science perceive more bias against their group than do Catholic and non-Christian students, and that biology professors report being less likely to hire an evangelical Christian student than a student who does not reveal their religious affiliation.