

“Why Scientists Need to Talk About Religion to Address Race and Gender Disparities in Science”

Speakers: Elaine Howard Ecklund, Professor of Sociology, Rice University; David R. Johnson, Assistant Professor of Higher Education Leadership, University of Nevada, Reno; Brandon Vaidyanathan, Associate Professor of Sociology, Catholic University of America

On October 5, 2020, the Religion and Public Life Program welcomed Elaine Howard Ecklund, Professor of Sociology at Rice University; David R. Johnson, Assistant Professor of Higher Education Leadership at the University of Nevada, Reno; and Brandon Vaidyanathan, Associate Professor of Sociology at Catholic University of America for a lecture entitled “Why Scientists Need to Talk About Religion to Address Race and Gender Disparities in Science.” The webinar was co-sponsored by [the Dialogue on Science, Ethics, and Religion program](#) at the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the largest body of U.S. scientists and publisher of *Science Magazine*.

The lecture included findings from Ecklund, Johnson, and Vaidyanathan’s research project, “Religion among Scientists in International Context (RASIC),” which uncovered scientists’ perspectives on religion, gender, and ethics with an international scope. The RASIC study took five years to complete, and encompassed surveying over 40,000 scientists and conducting in-depth interviews with over 600 scientists among eight national contexts. Based on this wide-sweeping and comprehensive pool of survey responses and interviews, Ecklund, Johnson, and Vaidyanathan presented five critical themes with an overarching thesis—that collaboration between science and religion has immense potential to improve racial and gender diversity in the practice of science. More specifically, their research uncovered that, despite common assumptions, religion exists in the professional sphere and practice of science. For one, many scientists around the world practice religion, including Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism,

and Islam. Further, most of the scientists surveyed and interviewed did not actually view religion and science at odds, either viewing the two as independent of one another (referring to different aspects of reality), or collaborative (each can be utilized to support the other). Lastly, Ecklund, Johnson, and Vaidyanathan found that religion is a part of racial and gender diversity in science, as some of the diversity in science is attributed to religious women (12% of U.S. scientists), Hispanics (40%), or Blacks (79%). Yet while religious populations host an immense amount of diversity that could benefit science, they do not often have the best relations with, conceptions of, or trust in scientific communities.

It is in acknowledgement of these findings that Ecklund, Johnson, and Vaidyanathan believe that collaboration between religious and scientific institutions can increase gender and racial diversity among science professionals: by inviting more religious diversity into scientific contexts and workplaces, other types of diversity follow suit. Because religion and science serve as knowledge- and value-producing institutions in our society, partnership between these two would allow more equitable access to scientific knowledge and opportunities to populations often unrepresented in science or discouraged from pursuing careers in science, including women, Black, and Hispanic populations. Increasing representation of these populations in science would also help build trust and rapport between these communities, ultimately helping to establish pathways for future teamwork and support. As one scientist said in an interview: “A lot of what attracts people is seeing people that look like them. And so we don’t see a lot of scientists that look like us or believe in us.”

Overall, Ecklund, Johnson, and Vaidyanathan underscore the importance of diversifying science by employing collaboration with religious populations: facilitating efforts to increase

communication and collaboration would allow for better ethnic and gender diversity in the practice of science and make science more accessible to underrepresented groups.