From the Religion Among Scientists in International Context Study
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On September 24, a priest of the Orthodox Church, an expert in Islamic studies, a director of a think tank, a historian of science, and several biologists and physicists gathered in the Princess Marie Louise Room at London’s prestigious Oxford and Cambridge Club. Despite their diverse backgrounds, they were drawn together by a common interest: the Religion among Scientists in International Context (RASIC) study. The U.K. and India results from the study were presented (the research will also include results from the U.S., Turkey, Italy, France, Hong Kong, and Taiwan), based on surveys and in-depth interviews with biologists and physicists at the countries’ top research universities and institutes. With so much data to work with, the conference was packed with information: statistics, quotes, and anecdotes coming from the U.K. and India.

Though their familiarity with the research varied—some served as advisory board members on the study while others had no prior knowledge other than what they gleaned from the invitation—it seemed all attendees came with an open mind and a desire to learn more about the topic. Framing the project for those who were unfamiliar, principal investigator (PI) Elaine Howard Ecklund kicked off the conference by outlining the research questions and methodological procedures before moving on to a statistical overview. While most attendees were likely not surprised to hear that 65% of U.K. scientists identified as non-religious compared with 6% of scientists in India, other pieces of the data were unexpected. For example, in the U.K., where the number of adherents of minority religions is small, the interviews highlighted the impact that minority religious groups—particularly Muslims—are having on U.K. science.
Ecklund credits the study’s mixed-methods approach with allowing her to uncover these sorts of findings.

The more substantive, meatier findings came later in the afternoon, when David Johnson and Brandon Vaidyanathan, both postdoctoral research fellows, presented the ways in which religion shapes teaching and research in the scientific workplace in both India and the U.K. Johnson and Vaidyanathan discussed the most prevalent themes that arose from the qualitative data. One of the patterns they highlighted was the tendency of scientists in a teaching role to negotiate the religious identities of students. As a professor of physics explained, “Religion teaches people to accept things without asking. … And that becomes a serious problem in understanding science. And I experience it in my classroom that unless provoked … whatever I say to students is a statement that is like an order. They will just accept it.” Johnson and Vaidyanathan found that in the research role, religion shapes the ethical perspectives of both religious and non-religious British and Indian scientists. A religious professor of biology in India, for example, described how her religious beliefs shape the goals of her research: “If you walk out of campus … you will see a bunch of kids with no clothes on their backs. … So you think immediately, I just spent a million dollars … I better get something out of it which hopefully is useful for somebody in the future.” This quote demonstrated to the attendees, who were largely unfamiliar with the Indian context, a clear distinction between doing scientific work in the U.K. and doing so in India.

At the end of the conference, Ecklund and fellow PI Kirstin Matthews presented “ten ways forward” in recognizing common ground between religious and scientific communities globally. “The conflict narrative is overstated,” Ecklund said as her first point, reinforcing her statement with both quantitative and qualitative data. This point circled back to what John
Hedley Brooke, an emeritus professor at the University of Oxford, had earlier said during his formal invited response. He encouraged viewing the boundaries between religion and science not on a horizontal plane as in direct conflict, but rather in a vertical sense with no one on one side of the conflict or the other. Instead, Brooke presented the idea, which was later echoed by Ecklund and Matthews, that the relations between religion and science are laid out on a spectrum: There isn’t just one relationship between the two, and this model allows everyone to have a unique set of beliefs.

Each attendee walked away with a tremendous amount of data to absorb and process. Thus, even after a three-hour conference, most attendees stayed for a reception where they could continue to discuss what they had heard that afternoon. The reception opened up the discussion to many more members of the public and thus many more viewpoints. To kick it off, Ecklund gave a brief presentation of the data tailored to a more general audience. She once again highlighted the major statistical findings, common themes in the U.K. and India data, and several ways forward. Ecklund then entertained questions for 20 minutes. The reception lasted more than two hours, and almost all the guests were still there when the Club staff swept in to get ready for the next event.

In addition to high attendance and levels of engagement at both the conference and reception, Ecklund and her team were encouraged by media interest in the study. The results presented at the conference appeared in 40 media outlets around the world, including *International Business Times, CNN-IBN – Online, Britain News, Yahoo! India, ScienceDaily, The Free Press Journal, and The Austrian Tribune.*