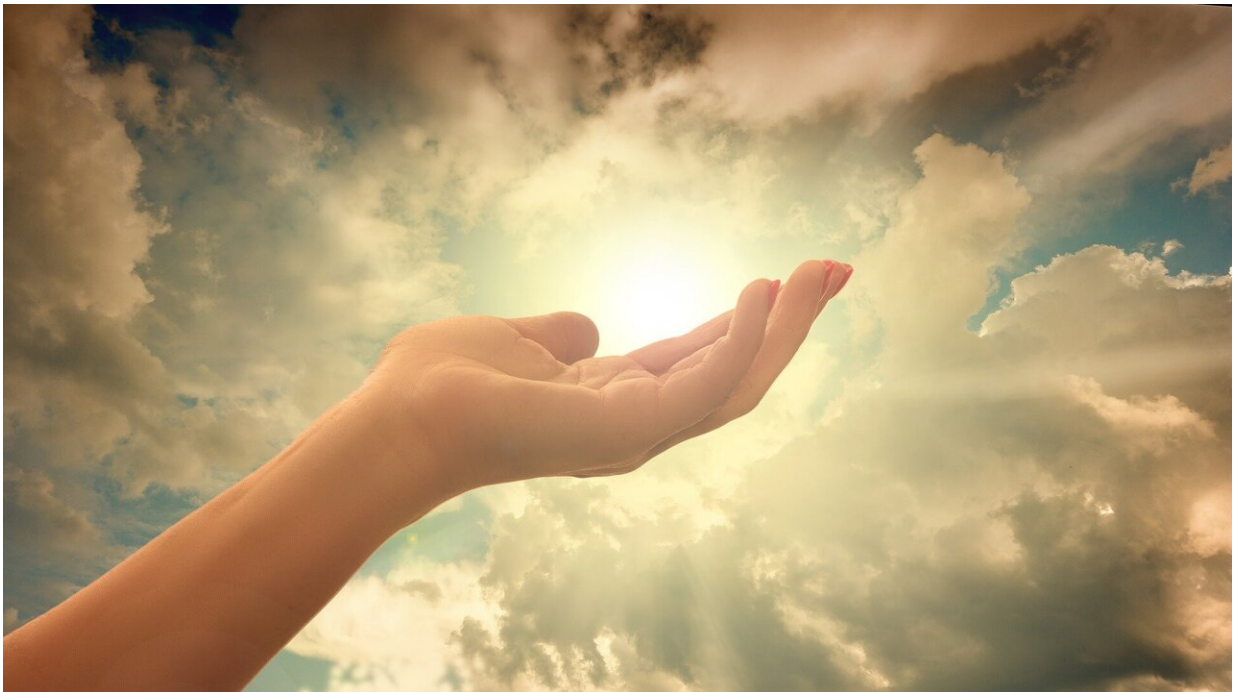


Study finds how people engage with science can promote unbelief or beliefs about God

July 18 2019



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Most Americans believe science and religion are incompatible, but a recent study suggests that scientific engagement can actually promote belief in God.

Researchers from the Arizona State University Department of Psychology found that [scientific information](#) can create a feeling of awe,

which leads to belief in more abstract views of God. The work will be published in the September 2019 issue of the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* and is now available online.

"There are many ways of thinking about God. Some see God in DNA, some think of God as the universe, and others think of God in Biblical, personified terms," said Kathryn Johnson, associate research professor at ASU and lead author on the study. "We wanted to know if scientific engagement influenced beliefs about the existence or nature of God."

Though science is often thought of in terms of data and experiments, ASU psychology graduate student Jordan Moon, who was a coauthor on the paper, said science might be more to some people. To test how people connect with science and the impact it had on their beliefs about God, the researchers looked at two types of scientific engagement: logical thinking or experiencing the feeling of awe.

The team first surveyed participants about how interested they were in science, how committed they were to logical thinking and how often they felt awe. Reporting a commitment to logic was associated with unbelief. The participants who reported both a strong commitment to logic and having experienced awe, or a feeling of overwhelming wonder that often leads to open-mindedness, were more likely to report believing in God. The most common description of God given by those participants was not what is commonly found in houses of worship: They reported believing in an abstract God described as mystical or limitless.

"When people are awed by the complexity of life or the vastness of the universe, they were more inclined to think in more spiritual ways," Johnson said. "The feeling of awe might make people more open to other ways of conceptualizing God."

In another experiment, the research team had the participants engage

with science by watching videos. While a lecture about [quantum physics](#) led to unbelief or agnosticism, watching a music video about how atoms are both particles and waves led people to report feeling awe. Those who felt awe also were more likely to believe in an abstract God.

"A lot of people think science and religion do not go together, but they are thinking about science in too simplistic a way and religion in too simplistic a way," said Adam Cohen, professor of psychology and senior author on the paper. "Science is big enough to accommodate religion, and religion is big enough to accommodate science."

Cohen added that the work could lead to broader views of both science and [religion](#).

More information: Kathryn A. Johnson et al, Science, God, and the cosmos: Science both erodes (via logic) and promotes (via awe) belief in God, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* (2019). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jesp.2019.103826](#)

Provided by Arizona State University

Citation: Study finds how people engage with science can promote unbelief or beliefs about God (2019, July 18) retrieved 7 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-07-people-engage-science-unbelief-beliefs.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--