

God and science not an easy mix for many

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Some philosophers, scientists and theologians have argued that religion and science have no fundamental conflict.

But many people seem to feel otherwise, if a new study is to be believed. Researchers found that a person's unconscious attitudes toward science and God are often opposed, depending on how religion and science are used to answer "ultimate" questions such as how the universe began or the origin of life.

The scientists found that after using science or God to explain such important questions, most people display a preference for one and a neutral or even negative attitude toward the other.

This effect appears to be independent of a person's religious background or views, said University of Illinois psychology professor Jesse Preston, who led the research. The study appears in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*.

If science and religion "are both ultimate explanations, at some point they have to conflict with each another because they can't possibly both explain everything," Preston said.

Preston and colleagues had 129 volunteers read short summaries of the Big Bang theory and the "Primordial Soup Hypothesis," scientific theories of the origin of the universe and life. Half the volunteers then read a statement that said that the theories were strong and supported by the data. The other half read that the theories "raised more questions than they answered."

In the second experiment, which involved 27 undergraduate students, half of the study subjects had to "list six things that you think God can explain." The others were asked to "list six things that you think can explain or influence God."

All the subjects were then required to quickly categorize various words as positive or negative on a computer.

"What they didn't realize was that they were being subliminally primed immediately before each word," Preston said. "So right before the word 'awful' came up on the screen, for example, there was a 15-millisecond flash of either 'God' or 'science,'" or a neutral word.

A flash was too brief to register consciously, Preston said, but it did have an effect. Those who had read statements emphasizing the explanatory power of science were able to categorize positive words appearing just after the word, "science," more quickly than those who had read statements critical of science.

Those who were asked to use God as an ultimate explanation for various phenomena displayed a more positive association with God and a much more negative association with science than those directed to list other things that can explain God, the researchers found.

Similarly, those who read the statement suggesting that the scientific theories were weak were extremely slow to identify negative words that appeared after they were primed with the word “God,” Preston said.

“It was like they didn’t want to say no to God,” she said.

“What is really intriguing is that the larger effect happens on the opposite belief,” she said. “When God isn’t being used to explain much, people have a positive attitude toward science. But when God is being used to account for many events – especially the things that they list, which are life, the universe, free will, these big questions – then somehow science loses its value.”

“On the other hand, people may have a generally positive view of science until it fails to explain the important questions. Then belief in God may be boosted to fill in the gap,” she said.

“To be compatible, science and religion need to stick to their own territories, their own explanatory space,” Preston suggested. But “religion and science have never been able to do that, so to me this suggests that the debate is going to go on. It’s never going to be settled.”