

Children make atheist parents go soft on religion

Atheists are known to be tough adherents to their “belief” that God does not exist. But their toughness may melt once children enter their personal world. A recent study reveals that 17 percent of atheists with children are involved in religious institutions for social and personal reasons. Some atheist scientists with children embrace religious traditions for social and personal reasons, according to research from Rice University and the University at Buffalo -- The State University of New York (SUNY).

The study also found that some atheist scientists want their children to know about different religions so their children can make informed decisions about their own religious preferences. "Our research shows just how tightly linked religion and family are in society -- so much so that even some of society's least religious people find religion to be important in their private lives," said Rice sociologist Elaine Howard Ecklund, the study's principal investigator and co-author of a paper in the December 2011 issue of the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. The researchers found that 17 percent of atheists with children attended a religious service more than once in the past year.

The research was conducted through interviews with a scientifically selected sample of 275 participants pulled from a survey of 2,198 tenured and tenure-track faculty in the natural and social sciences at 21 elite universities. Approximately half of the original survey population expressed some form of religious identity, whereas the other half did not.

The individuals surveyed cited personal and social reasons for integrating religion into their lives, including:

- Scientific identity - Study participants wish to expose their children to all sources of knowledge (including religion) and allow them to make their own choices about a religious identity.
- Spousal influence - Study participants are involved in a religious institution because of influence from their spouse or partner.

- Desire for community - Study participants want a sense of moral community and behavior, even if they don't agree with the religious reasoning.

Ecklund said one of the most interesting findings was discovering that not only do some atheist scientists wish to expose their children to religious institutions, but they also cite their scientific identity as reason for doing so.

"We thought that these individuals might be less inclined to introduce their children to religious traditions, but we found the exact opposite to be true," Ecklund said. "They want their children to have choices, and it is more consistent with their science identity to expose their children to all sources of knowledge."

One study participant raised in a strongly Catholic home said he came to believe later that science and religion were not compatible. He said what he wants to pass on to his daughter - more than the belief that science and religion are not compatible - is the ability to make her own decisions in a thoughtful, intellectual way.

"I don't indoctrinate her that she should believe in God," the study participant said. "I don't indoctrinate her into not believing in God." He said he sees himself as accomplishing this by exposing her to a variety of religious choices, including Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and others. Ecklund said the study's findings will help the public better understand the role that religious institutions play in society.

"I think that understanding how nonreligious scientists utilize religion in family life demonstrates the important function they have in the U.S.," she said. Ecklund is the author of "Science vs. Religion: What Scientists Really Think," published by Oxford University Press last year.