

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Religious Representation in Science: How Scientists in the United States, Mexico, and South Africa Respond

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ABSTRACT

Many institutions seek to increase representation in science by addressing the limited presence of certain racial and gender groups. These efforts often overlook religion as a dimension of stratification and its connections to other identities. Research on religion and science has focused more on scientists' attitudes toward religion than on the presence of religious individuals within scientific communities. Filling these gaps, this study examines how scientists in the United States, Mexico, and South Africa respond to religious people in science. Drawing on 53 in-depth interviews with biologists and physicists at leading universities in these countries, we find that while scientists narratively express openness toward religious individuals, they often include the caveat that religion should not enter scientific work, rendering religious people themselves suspect. Many participate in what we call "safe siloing." These findings highlight subtle forms of boundary work and identity suppression that religious scientists must navigate.

1 | Introduction

Understanding how scientists respond to the presence of religious individuals within academic science remains underexamined. While universities, STEM advocacy organizations, and government agencies increasingly prioritize broadening participation in science (Fry et al. 2021), a closer look at these efforts reveals three gaps in the research literature. First, existing studies rarely examine how scientists view the presence of religious people in science. Second, even though science is global, few studies examine the representation of religious people in academic science across national contexts. Third, prior research has focused more on religious ideas in the broader public than on how scientists themselves perceive religious individuals in their immediate professional environments.

Religion is not only a belief system but also an embodied identity that overlaps with or is even entwined with other identities, such as nationality, gender, ethnicity, and race. With a few notable exceptions (Ecklund 2010; Ecklund et al. 2019; Ecklund and Johnson 2021; Ecklund and Scheitle 2018), religious identities are

often overlooked in science. Drawing on 53 in-depth interviews with biologists and physicists in leading universities in the United States, Mexico, and South Africa, we ask: how do scientists in three national contexts respond to the presence and potential presence of religious people in academic science?

Examining how scientists from different countries perceive the presence of religious people in science provides a more nuanced understanding of how to increase access to academic science among those who are underrepresented, the public acceptance of science among religious people, and how scientists in different national contexts negotiate the demarcation problem when demarcation involves actual groups of people rather than ideas and knowledge structures (Gieryn 1983).

1.1 | Representation in Science

Most fields of science increasingly acknowledge representation's critical importance (Bolger et al. 2022). Historically, specific demographic groups have remained underrepresented in science.

tific fields. Women remain notably underrepresented in science broadly and the physical sciences, in particular, across multiple national contexts (Chan et al. 2024). They often face a lack of support or even discrimination, which can negatively affect their psychological well-being and persistence in the field (Schmader 2023). Focusing specifically on physics in the United States, Italy, France, and Taiwan, Chan et al. (2024) show that scientists frequently attribute this underrepresentation to structural barriers such as discrimination, exclusion from professional networks, and limited access to mentoring—factors that impede women's persistence in academic science.

The underrepresentation of minority groups can also result in a self-reinforcing cycle, where students from minority backgrounds may refrain from entering science careers because they do not see scientists who look like them in those fields (Andersen and Ward 2014). According to Fourcade (2010), direct, relatable experiences (embodied exposure) are more essential for success than abstract knowledge alone. For example, studies show that minority graduate students are more likely to persist in science when they are surrounded by higher proportions of peers from similar racial or ethnic backgrounds (Griffith 2010). Thus, a lack of peers or mentors who share the same racial or ethnic identity with minority students may lead to these students feeling they do not belong (Andersen and Ward 2014; Scheitle 2023). Recognizing how religious individuals are perceived in science can play a vital role in promoting broader access for underrepresented groups in science more broadly.

1.2 | Religion and Science

The relationship between religion and science has sometimes been portrayed as hostile and contentious, where religious people and scientists do not relate well to one another (Ecklund 2010; Ecklund and Scheitle 2018). Religious people sometimes view science as being in opposition to their religious beliefs (Ecklund and Scheitle 2018). Despite their personal beliefs, many religious scientists choose to keep their faith private in professional settings (Ecklund 2010). This is often due to a fear of hostility or negative judgment from their secular peers. As a result, there is a strong culture of suppressing religious discussions within US university departments (Ecklund 2010). This may explain why some religious groups are reticent to pursue scientific careers.

Previous research reveals that these dynamics differ according to national context. In a global study involving 20,000 scientists and 600 interviews across eight countries, Ecklund et al. (2019) found that the conflict between science and religion is not a universal feature but rather a Western construct. In countries such as Turkey, India, and Taiwan, most scientists believe in God or a god, and many see religion and science as intertwined or operating in parallel spheres of understanding. In the United States, they found that 65% of scientists reported belief in God yet often practiced what they termed soft secularism, in which science is imagined as secular by default, even if scientists themselves are not (Ecklund et al. 2019).

Furthermore, the national context shapes both personal beliefs and the institutional visibility of religion (Ecklund et al. 2019). For example, Ecklund et al. (2019) report that Indian scientists often

integrate spiritual perspectives into their scientific worldviews without perceiving conflicts, while French scientists operate with an assertive secularism that excludes religion. Thus, scientific identity in itself carries both moral and self-styled spiritual dimensions, complicating the idea that science is purely secular. These studies offer an overview of beliefs and attitudes regarding science and religion. They do not explore, however, how scientists view the presence of religious individuals within science itself.

1.3 | Religious Discrimination in Science

In the United States, 15% of scientists report experiencing some level of religious discrimination, although this is unevenly distributed across religious groups (Scheitle and Ecklund 2018). Muslim scientists report the highest proportion of religious discrimination, particularly Islamophobia (Scheitle and Ecklund 2018). Similarly, Protestant and Jewish scientists also report a significant level of perceived religious discrimination, with these being especially pronounced in biology (Scheitle and Ecklund 2018). Thus, the culture within academic science often expects one to appear without their religious self, which could lead to either overt discrimination or suppression of religious identity to avoid judgment or discrimination (Ecklund 2010).

It is also worth noting that experiences of religious discrimination vary across scientific disciplines (Scheitle and Ecklund 2018). For example, in biology, simply identifying as Protestant, Jewish, or Muslim is strongly associated with perceptions of discrimination, likely due to longstanding public conflicts over topics such as evolution and certain forms of stem cell research (Scheitle and Ecklund 2018). In contrast, in physics, religious discrimination appears to be more closely tied to visible religious practices, such as frequent church attendance or prayer, suggesting that religious identity may be tolerated as long as it is not openly expressed (Scheitle and Ecklund 2018).

In addition, factors such as stereotype threat can heighten perceptions of discrimination in science (Ecklund and Park 2009; Elsdon-Baker et al. 2026). Christians, for instance, are often stereotyped as less competent in scientific fields, which may lead highly religious individuals to distance themselves from scientific careers or to conceal their religious identity, particularly when such stereotypes are subtly reinforced within academic environments (Rios et al. 2015). Barnes et al. (2021) argue that Christianity functions as a *concealable stigmatized identity* (CSI) for biology graduate students, who often perceive a cultural stigma within their field that portrays them as unintelligent or anti-science. Because their Christian identity can be hidden, these students frequently employ identity-management strategies, such as concealing their faith to avoid professional bias or selectively revealing it to “safe” colleagues to counteract negative perceptions.

Outside the United States, Herbert et al. (2024) argue that although many scientists privately see no conflict between science and religion, a “conflict narrative” persists in the Argentine scientific field because it is reinforced through socialization in secular public institutions. As a result, religious scientists often strategically conceal their beliefs to manage impressions, generating a feedback loop in which silence sustains the perception

of field-wide consensus and the continued marginalization of religious identities.

In contrast, Thomas's (2019) study of scientists at the Indian Institute of Science shows how researchers construct identities as "rational believers," distinguishing their religious lives from those of laypeople by emphasizing the rationality and spirituality of their personal beliefs. Scientists in this context frame science and religion as separate, non-conflicting domains (Ecklund et al. 2019; Thomas 2019) and often recast religious rituals and festivals as "cultural" rather than religious traditions, a strategy that allows them to demarcate science from religion to preserve scientific credibility while participating in majoritarian Hindu practices.

Taken together, the literature suggests that religious inclusion and exclusion in science are not only a function of individual beliefs but are also shaped by boundary-drawing practices embedded in scientific communities. Drawing on Gieryn's (1983) concept of boundary work, these studies show how scientists rhetorically and practically distinguish legitimate scientific identities from those perceived as incompatible with scientific norms. Secular expectations often function as taken-for-granted standards of credibility, encouraging concealment, muting, or strategic management of religious identity. In this sense, everyday interactions and narratives within scientific settings reproduce broader norms governing who is seen as a legitimate member of the scientific community, even in the absence of overt discrimination.

2 | The Three National Contexts: United States, Mexico, and South Africa

2.1 | United States of America

The religious culture of the United States has been described as one of passive secularism; thus, it is a policy regime that involves official church-state separation alongside considerable tolerance for the exercise and visibility of religion (Ecklund et al. 2019). The religious composition of the United States is in a state of significant flux, characterized by the concurrent decline of historically dominant Christian traditions and the rapid rise of religious non-affiliation alongside regional increases in non-Christian religions (Fahmy 2025). The polarized religious landscape is mirrored in American attitudes toward the science-religion relationship. Public opinion is almost perfectly split: half of US adults believe that science and religion are mostly in conflict, while 47% see them as mostly compatible (Pew Research Center 2025). An interesting pattern emerges when these views are broken down by religiosity. It is the least religious Americans who are most likely to perceive a conflict. Among those with low levels of religious engagement, 73% say science and religion are mostly in conflict (Pew Research Center 2025). Conversely, among the highly religious (defined by Pew using a composite index of prayer frequency, belief in God or a universal spirit, the importance of religion, and religious service attendance), only 35% take this position; a majority (62%) see compatibility (Pew Research Center 2025). This perception gap becomes profoundly significant when examining the religious composition of the scientific community itself.

2.2 | Mexico

Mexico's population is overwhelmingly Catholic, a legacy of Spanish colonization, and religious practice and belief permeate daily life (Uchmany 1989). The Mexican state, however, that emerged from the 1910 Revolution was built on an ideology of firm secularism (laicismo) that was often explicitly anticlerical (Silva 2015). This has resulted in a sharp division between the private religiosity of the populace and the official secularism of public institutions, a division that is particularly evident in academia. This institutional secularism exists alongside a popular culture where nonscientific beliefs can be prevalent. Scholars such as Ernesto de la Torre Villar argued that science and religion were never on opposing paths in Mexico, particularly during the colonial era, where religious figures were instrumental in advancing scientific knowledge and technological development (Uchmany 1989). The intellectual environment within Mexico's elite public universities is largely shaped by the country's history of state-church conflict. The dialogue between science and religion is not a prominent feature of the academic landscape; instead, the dominant positions appear to be conflict or strict separation.

2.3 | South Africa

The religious landscape of South Africa is exceptionally diverse and cannot be understood through conventional Western categories. While approximately 80% of the population identifies as Christian, this figure is largely driven by the presence of African independent churches (AICs), such as the Zionist Christian Church and the Nazareth Baptist Church (NBC), which are among the largest and fastest-growing religious groups in the country and are characterized by a syncretic blending of Christian theology with traditional African worldviews, beliefs, and practices (The Association of Religion Data Archives [ARDA] 2025; Vusumuzi 2025). At the same time, South Africa is home to significant communities of Hindus, Muslims, and Jews, as well as practitioners of traditional African religions who may or may not also identify as Christians (The ARDA 2025). The country's post-apartheid constitution of 1996 reflects this diversity by guaranteeing freedom of religion and establishing a "cooperative model" between the state and religious communities while avoiding the establishment of any official religion (Vusumuzi 2025).

Public opinion on science and religion in South Africa presents a paradox. Quantitative surveys, such as the World Values Survey (WVS), show that a large majority of South Africans (nearly 76%) agree with the statement that "whenever science and religion conflict, religion is always right" (Falade and Guenther 2020). Taken at face value, this might suggest that the public is deeply anti-science. However, qualitative research reveals a much more complex and nuanced reality. This statement does not signify an outright rejection of science but rather a specific strategy for managing different knowledge systems (Falade and Guenther 2020). Scholars describe this relationship as one of "accommodation" (Falade and Guenther 2020). Science and religion are not seen as competitors for the same explanatory space but as different tools in a conceptual toolkit, each appropriate for different circumstances.

3 | Conceptual Limitations in Research on Representation in Science

Previous studies on representation in academic science often focus on the absence of individuals from marginalized racial groups and underrepresented genders. However, these studies rarely examine the presence of religious persons in academic science, despite religion being a significant aspect of identity for many individuals. This is very important because it helps determine whether religious identity is genuinely valued in science. This gap is critical for understanding how scientific norms and expectations might subtly shape who feels a sense of belonging or exclusion in different national scientific contexts. Recent scholarship has increasingly called for moving beyond US- and UK-centered accounts of science and religion toward comparative, global analyses attentive to national histories, institutional cultures, and local secular norms (Ecklund et al. 2019; Elsdon-Baker et al. 2026). In their edited volume, Elsdon-Baker et al. (2026) articulate this shift toward “globality,” emphasizing that dominant narratives about science and religion have been shaped disproportionately by Western Protestant contexts and that cross-national research is necessary to capture broader patterns of religious expression, stigma, and accommodation within scientific fields. This growing body of work positions national scientific communities as shaped by distinct political, cultural, and educational arrangements, underscoring the importance of studying religion in multiple settings. To address these gaps, this study asks: How do scientists in the United States, Mexico, and South Africa respond to the presence and potential presence of religious individuals in university science careers?

4 | Methods

To address the limitations, we found in the literature, we conducted 53 in-depth interviews with biologists and physicists at leading universities in the United States, Mexico, and South Africa. We chose university science because of its important role in research and training; we chose biology and physics because they are core disciplines of science present across nations, and each has an important historical relationship with religion (Ecklund et al. 2019). We chose scientists in the United States, Mexico, and South Africa because these nations are important for understanding how scientists view religion, they are emerging global or global leaders in science, and, in the case of Mexico and South Africa, they are understudied with regard to the science and religion interface. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the interview sample by age, gender, scientific discipline, country of residence, and religious identity.¹

Because respondents’ self-identified racial and ethnic identities are not analytically equivalent across the three national contexts, race and ethnicity are not included in Table 1 and are instead described narratively below. In the United States sample ($N = 12$), most respondents ($N = 8$) self-identified as White, including variations such as White European and White European and half Lebanese. The remaining respondents identified as Latino, South Asian, Ashkenazi Jewish, Hispanic/Spanish American, and White Hispanic. Among South African respondents ($N = 19$), the majority ($N = 12$) identified as White (including Afrikaners), while others identified as colored, Black African, or of Indian

descent. In the Mexican sample ($N = 22$), most respondents ($N = 17$) identified using terms such as Mestizo/a, Mexicano/a, or Latino/a, while a smaller subset identified as Black, mixed-race, or Indigenous.

Unusual for qualitative interview samples, our interview population was chosen through a random sampling process and then stratified by country, university, discipline, and gender to select participants. In each country, we first identified two focal universities, selecting elite research institutions with strong programs in physics and biology. We then constructed a sampling frame for each institution using publicly available departmental faculty lists. Undergraduate research assistants compiled faculty names, disciplinary affiliation, and gender into a master database for each country. To generate a randomized recruitment order, we assigned each faculty member a random number. Faculty were then sorted by university, discipline, and gender and randomized within each of these strata. Within every university, discipline, and gender grouping, we selected the first two women and the first three men as an initial recruitment group (Batch 1). This stratified randomization procedure ensured representation across institutions, disciplines, and gender categories. Applying this process across all strata produced an initial batch of 20 potential participants per country (5 per discipline at each university). We repeated this procedure to create 19 sequential recruitment batches, which were used as needed until recruitment goals were met, yielding a final sample of 53 completed interviews across the three countries. The interview sample includes scientists who identified as religious as well as those who identified as nonreligious. All interviews were transcribed, with interviews conducted in Spanish first transcribed in Spanish and then translated into English.

Analysis of the interview narratives involved a two-step process. In the first step, we conducted descriptive coding, creating a structured matrix to organize and review responses across participants. Each column in the spreadsheet corresponded to a major interview question. We then reviewed each transcript in full and recorded, for each participant, whether they provided an affirmative or relevant response to each question. These responses were coded as “1” for affirmative or relevant answers and “0” for nonresponse, negative, or off-topic responses. In an adjacent column labeled “quote,” we included excerpts from participants’ narratives that directly addressed the corresponding question. This approach allowed us to identify which respondents engaged with which topics and to compile representative quotations aligned with our research questions. The matrix served as a foundational tool for mapping patterns across cases and preparing the data for subsequent thematic analysis.

The second step involved interpretive coding. We closely examined each quote to identify recurring themes and the ways respondents talked about religious individuals in relation to the interview questions guiding the study. We generated analytic categories from the data themselves. We then moved back and forth between the quotations and emerging codes, refining thematic categories through repeated comparison across cases. These interpretations were shared with the research team for feedback and discussion, and codes were revised until consensus was reached. This interpretive process was guided by our overarching

TABLE 1 | Descriptive statistics of the analytical sample ($N = 53$).

Variable	<i>N</i>	(%)
Age (mean and SD)	57.04	11.84
Sex		
Male	27	50.9
Female	26	49.1
Scientific discipline		
Biology	30	56.6
Physics	23	43.4
Country of residence		
United States	12	22.64
Mexico	22	41.51
South Africa	19	35.85
Religious identification by country of residence		
United States ($N = 12$)	12	22.6
None	8	66.7
Other; not specific	2	16.7
Protestant	1	8.3
Muslim	1	8.3
Mexico ($N = 22$)	22	41.5
Nonreligious	15	68.2
Roman Catholic; Latin Church	5	22.7
Protestant	1	4.5
Don't know	1	4.5
South Africa ($N = 19$)	19	35.8
Protestant	9	47.4
None	6	31.6
Roman Catholic	2	10.5
Hindu	1	5.3
Jew	1	5.3
Total	53	100

focus on religion as a category of representation within scientific communities.

Our analysis centered on responses to three interview questions: (1) To what extent does religion or spirituality show up in conversations among scientists in your discipline in [the United States, Mexico, South Africa]? (2) In your opinion, how important is it for scientists to be open to people with different religious or spiritual beliefs? (3) Some scientists say they are treated unfairly or differently because of their religion or nonreligion. To what extent have you noticed or experienced this?

5 | Findings

5.1 | Religion Is Not Discussed

Through thematic inductive coding, we found that across national contexts, most of our scientist respondents rarely discuss

their own religiosity or others' religious identities in the course of their university-based scientific work. A biologist² in the United States said, "People generally don't talk much about their religious beliefs in scientific contexts. ... in conversations among scientists, very rarely." Similarly, a Mexican biologist³ also mentioned, "No. We almost never talk about... religion." When scientists discussed religious people in academic science, however, we found that they exhibit four attitudes toward religious people in academic science, which we call: rhetoric of ideological openness, safe siloing, silent acceptance, and explicit rejection. These attitudes vary across the three national contexts, reflecting differences in their cultural traditions and the historical relationship between religion and science in each country.

5.2 | Ideological Openness

Across the United States, Mexico, and South Africa, many scientists interviewed expressed an ideological openness to the

presence of religious individuals within the scientific community. This openness reflects not only tolerance but also a deeper alignment with what many described as the epistemic and ethical values of science, namely, inclusivity, humility, and a continual openness to new perspectives.

To refine our analysis, we identified two subthemes within the theme of ideological openness: general ideological openness and openness as a scientific virtue. The subtheme of general ideological openness captures responses in which participants acknowledged the importance of accepting individuals from diverse religious backgrounds, without necessarily linking this openness to scientific practice. In contrast, openness as a scientific virtue reflects responses that emphasize openness as a core principle of science, emphasizing its role in fostering the exchange of ideas, encouraging innovation, and advancing scientific knowledge.

5.3 | General Ideological Openness

Under the subtheme of general ideological openness, scientists emphasized the importance of being open to persons of different religious backgrounds without necessarily mentioning science. A US physicist⁴ shared, “It’s important, in that we should welcome different viewpoints.” Another US biologist⁵ also shared, “Oh, I think one should be absolutely open, and in general, I would say, even though the faculty themselves may not be religious, I think they are very open to people, at least here, they are very open to people of all faiths.” In Mexico, a similar pattern emerged. Most scientists interviewed expressed deep respect for religious diversity within scientific environments. For instance, a Mexican physicist⁶ stated, “I think that in general, not only for scientists, it is important to be open and to [convey] respect.”

Another Mexican scientist⁷ stressed a passive form of pluralism: coexistence without engagement. “I think fundamentally, people have respect. I mean, you believe that, well, that’s fine, I don’t share it, but I’m not going to feel bad, I’m not going to force you to accept my point of view. I think you know they exist and you let them be, right?” Another biologist⁸ from South Africa emphasized a humanistic ethic that values religious diversity without requiring agreement. “So, for me, I think we should be very tolerant and very accommodating, not to the point of giving up our own beliefs, but it’s the point of accepting all people and loving all people, that’s what I believe.”

5.4 | Openness as a Scientific Virtue

Scientists emphasized the value of religious diversity as a resource for scientific creativity and collaboration. A US biologist⁹ articulated this view, saying, “if you’re a scientist, and maybe many other people, too. You keep your mind open, and that is that you know, with experience, you might form a new idea about how the world works. You might change your mind a little bit, and that’s, that’s all science is... Science is having the ability to keep an open mind about something and then changing it if, if it needs to be changed, because you know it just doesn’t your idea doesn’t fit the way you think it looks like the world works.”

Another scientist¹⁰ from the United States also said, “because somebody’s experience in a particular religion, they may, you know, think about a problem differently than somebody of a different religion, and that that’s going to add to the scientific enterprise. So it’s a good deal.” Some of the scientists in Mexico also emphasized how diverse worldviews, including religious perspectives, can offer alternative epistemological contributions to science. A physicist¹¹ shared, “I think you always have to be open to any other person, regardless of his religion, spirituality, or race, because... each person’s experiences can provide a different point of view on how to analyze things and how to understand the world.”

Another scientist¹² in Mexico emphasized diversity as a virtue in science, sharing: “I think that due to the nature of science, you have to be open to everyone. If dogmatically you refuse to interact with persons because they are religious, or because they are of a certain race, or sex, or gender... I think a scientist must be open to everyone, and part of that diversity is the religious one.” A South African biologist¹³ shared, “I do think it is important. Just because, I think it, you know, I think the diversity in, in science is important.” Another South African biologist¹⁴ shared, “Hugely important. Especially in the field of genetics. So, there’s a lot of, obviously genetics is all about people and families and their beliefs. So, we have our genetic scientists, and we’ve also got our genetic doctors and counselors who meet with the patients that have these disorders and discuss with them their risks and the risks to their children. So, it’s always very much emphasized that people will have different beliefs. There’s non-directive counseling. You accept, you know, you present the facts, but people will make decisions based on their culture, their religious beliefs, and so on.”

Taken together, these responses across all three national contexts reveal a broadly shared ideal typical commitment to ideological openness toward religious scientists. This openness is justified not merely as a matter of professional decorum but as a fundamental aspect of scientific practice, enriched by diverse life experiences and worldviews. For many respondents, such inclusivity is seen as enhancing, rather than threatening, the rigor and creativity of scientific inquiry.

5.5 | Safe Siloing

Beyond ideological openness, some scientists across the United States, Mexico, and South Africa articulated a form of conditional acceptance of religious persons in science—what we refer to as “safe siloing.” This position maintains that religious scientists are acceptable within the scientific community *if* their religious beliefs and practices do not interfere with what scientists see as the foundational norms of science, such as objectivity, evidence-based inference, and empirical rigor. In other words, religious identity is tolerated when it remains compartmentalized—kept private and detached from scientific work (notably, while this view is present across all three countries, it appears to be more prominent among South African respondents). This orientation differs from accounts that interpret tensions between science and religion primarily through a historically rooted “conflict narrative.” Instead, scientists in our sample tended to describe

science and religion as addressing different domains, an understanding that echoes Gould's (1997) notion of "non-overlapping magisteria." However, our concept of safe siloing focuses less on epistemological boundaries between science and religion and more on the social management of religious identity and expression within scientific institutions.

Even though it is a small sample, the higher frequency of "safe siloing" views in South Africa warrants analytical attention, given the country's history of managing religious and cultural diversity through constitutional pluralism, its legacy of apartheid-era religious marginalization, and the role of post-apartheid secularism in fostering institutional boundaries between religion and science (Settler 2025). In the United States, several scientists framed their tolerance for religious colleagues as conditional upon noninterference with scientific standards. One biologist¹⁵ emphasized the need to avoid polarizing science and religion into hostile camps but still implied a boundary between them, saying, "You know, because it sort of then becomes viewed on both sides as being, you know, two sort of hostile camps. And my personal view is it doesn't need to be looked at that way. They're just sort of, or they should be, you know, two sort of different ways to look at the world."

Another physicist¹⁶ was more explicit in prioritizing scientific work over religious expression, saying, "I think it very much depends on what you mean by open, in terms of accepting them as colleagues and being willing to work with them, it's very important for them, for people to not be judgmental about this so long as it doesn't affect their work." The respondent emphasizes the importance of being open to colleagues with different religious backgrounds in a professional scientific setting. They highlight that what matters most is fostering a nonjudgmental work environment where individuals are accepted *if* their personal beliefs do not interfere with their job performance. This reflects a call for mutual respect and professional boundaries in science.

In addition, the response emphasizes the importance of professional openness and nonjudgmental collaboration, noting that religious identity is acceptable in the workplace so long as it does not interfere with the responsibilities of scientific work. Rather than suggesting a hierarchy, the speaker draws a boundary between personal belief and professional performance. In Mexico, similar views were expressed, although sometimes framed differently. One biologist¹⁷ underscored the centrality of objectivity in scientific practice. He shared, "It is important, because in the end, what is necessary is to have objectivity, to see the facts as they are, consider the results of the experiments and, based on that, build models and try to explain nature, regardless of religious ideas that they have behind them, and that motivates the work or is the background of why they want to do research."

Another physicist¹⁸ described how he avoids religious discussions altogether to prevent conflict. He shared, "I think there are beliefs that cannot be proved, you know, and my beliefs cannot be proved either, so I mean I have respect for them, and usually I since think that any discussion will not go far enough, then I don't talk about it. That's my position. Yeah." Another physicist¹⁹ emphasized the importance of mutual non-imposition sharing: "We don't give any opinion about someone is religious, or we just

respect the person is religious. Okay, that's it. But the question is, that person [should not] force me to believe in God, or to be religious, or something like that." For this particular scientist, the concern is not necessarily about religion and science being in conflict but rather about the religious scientists engaging in proselytization. These Mexican scientists share a preference for personal restraint and cognitive boundaries between science and religion, reinforcing a notion of professionalism defined by neutrality and discretion and revealing an implicit image of the kind of religious colleague they view as compatible with scientific work.

In South Africa, this siloed approach was even more explicit. One biologist²⁰ drew a firm line between religion and science, particularly in educational and epistemic domains. She shared, "I think scientists have to listen and have to have open minds. I myself am not religious, and so I do not use religion. And I don't think it's correct as a scientist to use religion as the basis for teaching or understanding the world—trying to understand the world. And I wouldn't use religion as part of that explanation. And I wouldn't expect other scientists to do that either." Another South African biologist²¹ acknowledged the legitimacy of personal belief systems but clearly delineated them from professional practice. He shared, "I think it's absolutely important. I mean, I've—I mean, is—open in the sense that you know you must believe what you need to believe, to make your life work as best as you need your life to work. But where you know, being a secular state, we? We certainly don't allow any of that to come into our working environment. So if someone wanted to open a staff meeting with a prayer, I would object."

The statements by these scientists exemplify a strong commitment to maintaining epistemic boundaries and signal a normative orientation in which science must remain insulated from religious influence to preserve its credibility and authority. In sum, safe siloing reflects tolerance with boundaries: religious identity is accepted, but only insofar as it does not cross into the domain of scientific reasoning or institutional practice. This theme reveals a widely shared but cautiously negotiated boundary between inclusion and professional secularism—a form of tolerance that is conditional and compartmentalized.

5.6 | Silent Acceptance (Invisibility of Religion)

In addition to the dominant themes of ideological openness and conditional acceptance, some scientists expressed a distinct but marginal orientation that we refer to as silent acceptance. It is important to distinguish this position from safe siloing. Whereas safe siloing involves active, boundary work through which scientists express openness to religious individuals while insisting that religion and science remain in separate, non-overlapping domains, silent acceptance operates through passive epistemic ambiguity. In these cases, scientists do not specify inclusion criteria because professional norms render religious identity largely invisible, creating an epistemic blind spot in which scientists coexist without attending to religion as a salient dimension of difference.

Rather than being actively silenced in the moment, religious identity remains unexpressed because everyday professional

interactions do not invite its articulation. Silent acceptance thus reflects a broader culture of religious identity concealment, in which religion is tolerated not through active boundary policing but through mutual ignorance and strategic ambiguity.

In addition, the distinction between “ideological openness” and “silent acceptance” lies in how respondents frame their openness to religious persons within scientific spaces. Under ideological openness, respondents draw on scientific virtues, such as openness or pluralism, to justify welcoming religious colleagues. In contrast, silent acceptance refers to contexts in which respondents emphasize the relative invisibility or concealment of religious identity, noting that they are often unable to identify who among their colleagues is religious. In such cases, acceptance operates less as an expressed principle and more as a byproduct of religion’s muted presence. A US physicist²² explained, “I would say it’s [religion] a hidden variable. But I have no idea about everybody else. So, it may affect their lives strongly, but I don’t know about it, and it doesn’t affect my interaction with them in a way that is obvious to me.” This statement highlights the speaker’s limited awareness of colleagues’ religious identities, suggesting that such identities are largely invisible in the workplace. The acceptance here is contingent on nondisclosure: the respondent is comfortable with religious colleagues as long as their religious commitments remain unexpressed and socially unobtrusive.

Similarly, a Mexican physicist²³ noted, “More than non-openness, an image of non-openness, because it is also true that I do not know.” This response reflects a minimal level of acceptance, where the scientist acknowledges the presence of religious individuals but only in a vague or presumed manner. The absence of clarity itself becomes the condition for toleration. A Mexican scientist²⁴ similarly noted the irrelevance of religion in professional discourse, “I was director of this institute for four years and [laughs] the religious issue never came up.” A South African scientist²⁵ remarked, “So, it’s quite a diverse population that works together. So, we have Muslim colleagues and Hindu colleagues.”

In all the responses, religion is described as present but muted—either never explicitly discussed or known only through indirect references. This form of silent acceptance operates through strategic ambiguity, where the lack of overt difference enables smooth social interaction. Religion is acknowledged as potentially present among colleagues but remains largely unspoken of, either inferred through indirect cues or simply never discussed. This reflects a form of tacit acceptance shaped more by professional norms than by active avoidance. Rather than signaling discomfort with religion, silence may function as a way to maintain smooth collaboration and mutual respect in settings where personal belief is seen as private. Thus, this is more about the quiet coexistence of differences within a shared professional setting.

5.7 | Explicit Rejection

The least common perspective identified in the data is one of explicit rejection. It is important to clarify that in the context of our respondents’ everyday academic interactions, explicit rejection does not necessarily manifest as the overt hostility

characteristic of New Atheist discourse, which often claims that religious individuals are intellectually incapable of scientific rigor (Dawkins 2008; Ecklund and Johnson 2021). Rather, it manifests as the explicit rejection of religion as a legitimate identity or discursive presence within the scientific domain. While this perspective (“explicit rejection”) shares the language of “domain separation” with safe siloing, it represents a different form of normative boundary work. Safe siloing implies conditional tolerance, asking religious scientists to actively compartmentalize their faith to maintain harmony. Explicit rejection, however, refuses this accommodation. By asserting that religion “should not come into play” or that secular education fundamentally “does not mix” with religion, these scientists are outright denying the legitimacy of religious identity within the institutional and epistemological boundaries of science. Although numerically rare, such views define the absolute limits of what is considered legitimate participation in science, implicitly challenging broader efforts to include religion. A US scientist²⁶ argued that religion and science are fundamentally distinct spheres and that religious identity should be irrelevant to scientific practice, remarking, “I think, in the general practice of science, not much in the actual doing of scientific work. . . . they are separate domains so that their religious spiritual beliefs don’t inform their scientific practice and their scientific practice doesn’t interact much with their spiritual beliefs.”

A Mexican scientist²⁷ echoed this boundary-policing stance, tying it to the secular foundations of the educational system, noting, “I think the most important thing is respect. I think that religious belief is something you grow up with, with the persons who educated you, and it’s not appropriate for a working or scientific environment because we were trained as professionals at a certain age and perhaps, at a very early age our school education started, but fortunately in Mexico education is secular and it doesn’t mix with aspects [of religion]. . . . Unless someone decides to send their children to schools that are not so secular, right? However, apart from those cases, I would say it does not mix.”

A South African scientist²⁸ stated the position most unequivocally, “I don’t even think it should be a factor. Religion, or spirituality shouldn’t really come. You should be open to anybody that’s got a new idea, willing to discuss your work, their work. Religion, and spirituality should not come into play there.”

Overall, scientists view religious belief as epistemologically incompatible with the principles and practices of science. In their framing, religion is not merely to be compartmentalized (as in safe siloing); it is to be excluded altogether from scientific environments. This form of rejection reflects a strong secularist orientation, where scientific professionalism is equated with the absence of religious discourse or identity entirely. Although numerically rare, such views are present and define the boundaries of what is considered legitimate participation in science, and they implicitly challenge broader efforts toward religious inclusion. Their presence also underscores the ongoing tension between pluralism and secularism in scientific institutions. While some scientists express ideological openness toward individuals from different religious backgrounds and others explicitly reject them, these positions raise an important question: how do such boundaries manifest in scientific spaces? In the absence of overt rejection, the professional expectations surrounding religion in

science can lead religious individuals to perceive subtle forms of exclusion. To explore this, we now turn to scientists' perceptions of religious discrimination within their scientific communities.

5.8 | Perceptions of Religious Discrimination

Another way that scientists might respond to religious scientists in their midst is to discriminate against them. We found, however, that most of the scientists in the study mentioned that they had not experienced any form of discrimination in their scientific community. American scientists uniformly believe there is no discrimination against religious scientists in the US scientific community. A US physicist²⁹ shared, "I'm not aware of it. I'm not aware of it. I mean, but since it's a topic we rarely talk about, you know, I don't know. I mean this one woman who I told you was kind of hardcore Jewish, she seemed to feel that it was potentially a liability for her, but in recruiting her I said, 'You know, as far as I'm concerned, it's perfectly fine. But I think she seems to have this sense that it's potentially a liability.'" Another US biologist³⁰ shared, "I'm not a [3-second pause] I personally have not experienced it. My father, who was Jewish, got his job taken away at [a major public university] because he was Jewish, but that was in 1950. So I haven't heard anything in the last, you know you know, 30 years of anything like that happening to anybody. I would say that that's pretty unusual. I just I hadn't. I, personally haven't heard of it."

In contrast, Mexican scientists indicated that they occasionally experience or have heard of others experiencing religious discrimination in science. A Mexican physicist³¹ remarked, "So this thing exists, I would not say this doesn't exist. Yes. It exists. But you know. It's like something happened with someone, and you'll find some other person that who doesn't care so that make the difference. And you deal with the one that care, and you forget about the other one." Another Mexican physicist³² also shared, "As I said, it's not an issue I have discussed with other colleagues, and in that sense, I have never felt discrimination and have never discussed it. I think that I don't see it regarding religion."

South African scientists, although most also believe that religious discrimination is essentially absent, reported that a small number of them had unintentionally had conflicts with colleagues because of religious beliefs or were uncertain whether such discrimination exists. A South African biologist³³ noted, "Because we don't. You don't know what religion people are. It's very difficult to discriminate unless you really carry religion on a sleeve like, if you wear a hijab, or you wear a cross, or whatever, but even then I don't think." Another South African physicist³⁴ also said, "I definitely can't—I haven't been involved in any case, serious case where there was explicit discrimination. But I know for sure there is implicit bias. And that is really tricky to change."

6 | Discussion and Conclusions

Expanding representation in science has become a priority for many universities and organizations (Bolger et al. 2022). Although considerable efforts have been made to address the underrepresentation of certain racial, ethnic, and gender groups, religious identity has remained largely absent from these conver-

sations and initiatives. Existing research on religion and science has primarily focused on the presence of religious ideas in scientific fields and the attitudes of scientists toward religion (Ecklund 2010), as well as religious individuals' views on science (Ecklund and Scheitle 2018). Some of these studies have taken a cross-national perspective (Ecklund et al. 2019; Elsdon-Baker et al. 2026), offering valuable insights into the broader relationship between religion and science. However, they often overlook how scientists themselves perceive the presence of religious individuals rather than religion as a broad knowledge and practice category within scientific communities.

This study examined how scientists in the United States, Mexico, and South Africa respond to the presence of religious people in science. We found that most scientists rarely discuss religion in the course of their scientific work. By excluding religion from workplace discussions altogether, our scientist respondents demonstrate a self-imposed constraint motivated by the scope of scientific inquiry, which emphasizes neutrality and objectivity. This finding supports Ecklund's (2010) finding that nearly 20 years after she conducted her data collection, a strong culture of suppression of religious identity persists among religious scientists due to fear of negative judgment and hostility because of their religion.

We also found that most scientists across all three countries expressed either complete or conditional ideological acceptance of religious individuals in science. However, this openness was often with a caveat; several scientists emphasized that their acceptance depended on religious individuals not bringing religion into the scientific workplace. Among those who expressed complete ideological openness, many linked it to the value of openness as a core principle of science itself. At the same time, some scientists acknowledged the importance of being open to colleagues from different religious backgrounds but noted that they were often unaware of their colleagues' religious identities, pointing to the possibility that scientists may conceal their religious identities (Barnes et al. 2021; Ecklund and Park 2009), making it difficult to determine whether they worked alongside religious individuals.

In contrast, a small number of American and South African scientists completely rejected religious individuals in the scientific community. Most scientists also stated that they believe religious discrimination is nonexistent within the scientific community. They often supported this view by pointing to the fact that their colleagues rarely disclose or display their religious identities, making it difficult to know who is religious or whether anyone has experienced discrimination based on religion. Different national contexts have different religious traditions as well as distinct relationships between religion and science (Khalsa et al. 2022). The between-country differences in scientists' responses to religious individuals in science may reflect variations in epistemologies, cultural traditions, historical trajectories, political agendas, and lived experiences that shape how science and its relationship to religion are understood (Di et al. 2021; Ecklund et al. 2019).

In addition, scientists' emphasis on the absence of religion in scientific spaces reinforces the global narrative of a boundary between scientists and nonscientists, a boundary that a religious person who is actually part of academic science may

threaten (Gieryn 1983). In contexts where scientists uphold this framework, the presence of religious individuals within scientific spaces may be perceived as a violation of the separation between religion and science. However, in settings where scientists view a collaborative relationship between religion and science, such concerns may not arise and allow for a greater acceptance of religious individuals within the scientific space.

Furthermore, the specific ways these boundaries are policed correlate closely with each country's distinct historical patterns of church-state politics. The relationship between the state and religious institutions matters because it plays a central role in structuring national orientations toward religion and secularity (Ecklund et al. 2019). In Mexico, the expectation to keep religion out of academia is historically grounded in the state's ideology of firm secularism (*laicismo*) and a legacy of anticlericalism, rendering public universities bastions of secular defense where religion is sometimes met with explicit rejection (Silva 2015). In the United States, "safe siloing" reflects a pragmatic strategy to avoid importing the highly politicized, public "culture wars" into the laboratory; scientists actively silo religion to prevent the formation of the "two hostile camps" they witness in the broader American public. Conversely, the prominence of epistemic boundaries in South Africa reflects the complex navigation of a post-apartheid, constitutionally pluralistic society. Against the backdrop of diverse knowledge systems and decolonial critiques, South African scientists employ "safe siloing" to secure the epistemic authority of Western scientific models by strictly delineating them from vibrant, everyday religious and indigenous expressions (Falade and Guenther 2020; Settler 2025). Thus, the microlevel reception of religious individuals in science is inextricably linked to macrolevel historical state-religion settlements.

Viewed through the lens of boundary work (Ecklund et al. 2011), professions of openness toward religious individuals may operate less as substantive endorsements of religious inclusion and more as normative performances aligned with dominant scientific ideals of tolerance and neutrality. In practice, such openness often coexists with informal expectations that religious identity remains concealed or muted, allowing secular norms to regulate which identities are appropriate for public expression without overt exclusion. This dynamic can mask subtle forms of stigmatization, as religious difference is accepted in principle but constrained through expectations of self-management (Barnes et al. 2021; Herbert et al. 2024; Scheitle and Ecklund 2018). As prior research suggests, these forms of boundary work enable scientific communities to sustain an appearance of inclusivity while continuing to marginalize visible religious expression (Gieryn 1983).

Our findings reveal some valuable implications. First, scientists have difficulty distinguishing between the presence of religious people in scientific work and religious ideologies influencing scientific work. These scientists often conflate the two, believing that religion is deeply embodied in actors and that this embodiment is inevitable, observable, and has tangible effects on the scientific method. Second, these scientific respondents are likely to assume that religious people will utilize their religion in inappropriate ways in scientific work. Scientists may unintentionally signal that religious persons are not entirely welcome in the scientific

community. The neglect and avoidance of religion in everyday discourse may conceal a potential religion-blind bias in science, which indirectly excludes religious people from scientific work. Future studies should investigate how both religious and non-religious scientists engage in boundary work within scientific environments that appear accepting of religious individuals but implicitly discourage the open expression of religion, the very aspect that defines their identity.

Our findings also have important implications for institutional diversity and inclusion policies within academic science. Inclusion initiatives in institutions often emphasize demographic categories such as gender and race/ethnicity while treating religion as irrelevant or private. Our findings suggest that this omission may unintentionally reinforce secular norms that discourage the visible expression of religious identity, even in environments where openness is publicly affirmed. As a result, religious persons may be formally included yet informally expected to manage or conceal their identities (Barnes et al. 2021; Scheitle and Ecklund 2018), producing subtle forms of exclusion.

While our findings highlight overarching national norms around scientists' perceptions of religious persons in science, prior research underscores that the expression or suppression of religious identity in scientific settings is embedded in structural power asymmetries. Herbert et al. (2024), for example, show that identity management practices are conditioned by disciplinary location and institutional socialization, with boundary work intensifying in contexts where secular norms are more strongly enforced. Relatedly, Scheitle and Ecklund (2018) demonstrate that disciplinary proximity to public controversies such as evolution and stem cell research often renders boundary work more salient in biology than in physics. At the same time, examining how academic seniority, institutional prestige, disciplinary hierarchies, or national funding structures shape the expression of religious identity lies beyond the scope of this study. Future research should investigate how these intersecting academic hierarchies distribute the risks and burdens of religious identity expression across scientific fields and national contexts.

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Endnotes

¹While racial identities were described narratively in Section 4 to preserve their contextual meaning, religious affiliations reported by the 53 respondents were recoded using country-specific categories drawn from the WVS to allow for structured cross-national comparison. Religious categories were coded separately within each national context rather than harmonized across countries. In the South African sample, respondents with no religious affiliation, including atheists, were coded as "none." Christian denominations were grouped under "Protestant" or "Roman Catholic," and other affiliations were coded as "Jew" or "Hindu." In the US sample, respondents with no religious affiliation, including atheists, were similarly coded as "none," while religious descriptions that did not map clearly onto existing WVS categories (e.g., Unitarian Universalist) were classified as "other; not specific." In the

Mexican sample, religious affiliations were coded using the national WVS categories; atheists and agnostics were coded as “nonreligious,” Catholic variants as “Roman Catholic or Latin Church,” and responses that could not be clearly classified were coded as “don’t know,” reflecting the absence of an “other” category in the Mexican WVS framework.

- ²US4_Biology_Professor_66years_Male_Not a theist_2024_0506.
- ³MX2_Biology_Professor_51years_Female_Practicing Catholic_2024_0509.
- ⁴US5_Physics_Assistant Professor_37years_Male_Agnostic_2024_0208.
- ⁵US8_Biology_Professor_64yers_Female_Islam_2024_0306.
- ⁶MX1_Biology_Professor_37years_Female_Spiritual not religious_2024_0110.
- ⁷MX3_Biology_Professor_49years_Male_Agnostic_2024_0603.
- ⁸SA12_Biology_Senior Lecturer_56years_Female_Christian_2023_1201.
- ⁹US1_Biology_Professor_68years_Male_Spiritual and Areligious_2024_0522.
- ¹⁰US9_Biology_Professor_70years_Male_Atheist_2024_0508.
- ¹¹MX14_Physics_Professor_57years_Female_None_24_0108.
- ¹²MX7_Biology_Professor_61years_Male_Catholic_24_0122.
- ¹³SA1_Biology_Lecturer_44years_Female_Christian_24_0226.
- ¹⁴SA5_Biology_Research Faculty_48years_Female_Spiritual But Not Religious_23_1205.
- ¹⁵US2_Biology_Professor_67years_Male_Non-religious_24_0418.
- ¹⁶US12_Physics_Professor_65years_Male_None_23_1109.
- ¹⁷MX22_Physics_Professor_69years_Male_Agnostic_24_0601.
- ¹⁸MX19_Physics_Professor_81years_Male_Atheist_24_0327.
- ¹⁹MX12_Physics_Associate Professor_52years_Female_Non-religious_23_1123.
- ²⁰SA2_Biology_Associate Professor_61years_Female_Non-religious_23_1204.
- ²¹SA4_Biology_Professor_58years_Male_Non-religious_24_0220.
- ²²US6_Physics_Professor_65years_Female_Unitarian Universalist_24_0306.
- ²³MX17_Physics_Professor_65years_Female_Christian_24_0416.
- ²⁴MX14_Physics_Professor_57years_Female_None_24_0108.
- ²⁵SA5_Biology_Research Faculty_48years_Female_Spiritual But Not Religious_23_1205.
- ²⁶US4_Biology_Professor_66years_Male_Not a Theist_24_0506.
- ²⁷MX16_Physics_Professor_50years_Female_Practicing Catholic_24_0320.
- ²⁸SA11_Biology_Lecturer_45years_Female_Catholic_24_0215.
- ²⁹US7_Physics_Professor_65years_Male_Christian_23_1103.
- ³⁰US9_Biology_Professor_70years_Male_Atheist_24_0508.
- ³¹MX12_Physics_Associate Professor_52years_Female_Non-religious_23_1123.
- ³²MX14_Physics_Professor_57years_Female_None_24_0108.
- ³³SA11_Biology_Lecturer_45years_Female_Catholic_24_0215.
- ³⁴SA20_Physics_Senior Lecturer_49years_Female_Protestant Christianity_23_1204.

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