

Religion, Science and Politics

By Naomi Fa-Kaji, Rice University '14

As part of the Religion and Public Life Program's Religion in the 2012 Elections Symposium, Dr. Neal Lane, Professor of Physics and former director of the National Science Foundation, gave a presentation on "Religion, Science, and Politics." In his talk, Lane discussed the interplay of religion and science in the political arena. Following the presentation, Kirstin Matthews, Baker Institute Fellow in Science and Technology Policy, co-facilitated an audience discussion.

Lane argued that the common perception of a conflict between science and religion stems from highly publicized debates around a select number of scientific issues, as well as widespread scientific illiteracy among the general public. He stressed that this general lack of scientific knowledge "provides a convenient opening for those who find science inconvenient." To illustrate this point, he highlighted the prevalence of advertisement campaigns that use scientific jargon and "research" to sell a company's products. Because of the general uncertainty regarding the specifics of scientific findings, Lane believes that "science has [now] become politicized," with many people taking a partisan stance on scientific issues. He contended that the tendency "to put politics ahead of science" deepens the divide between scientists and the general public.

In reality, the relationship between science and religion in the United States is more complex than widely believed. Lane cited Ecklund's finding that many academic scientists in the United States are religious to some extent and do not actually perceive a conflict between their work as scientists and their religious beliefs.



Neal Lane takes audience questions after his talk

Call for post-baccalaureate and post-doctoral fellows

The Religion and Public Life Program is now accepting applications for post-baccalaureate and post-doctoral fellows. The post-baccalaureate Fellowship program is designed to provide recent college graduates with the opportunity to work with a sociology department faculty member in an intensive research and mentoring experience related to the study of religion. The post-doctoral fellowship is a two-year position during which the fellow will work primarily on the scientists in international contexts study.

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Similarly, while religion is an important force in the lives of many citizens, the American public tends to hold scientists in high esteem and is generally willing to support scientific research. Though science is a powerful force in American society, it has not really entered political discussions aside from a few "hot-button topics." Lane stressed the need for a greater scientific understanding on the part of the American public, as well as increased dialogue between scientists, political leaders, and voters. Such dialogue, he argued, is only possible when the public understands the issues being discussed. Thus, Lane believes that education is the first step in bridging the gap between scientists and the general public.

A lively discussion followed the presentation, centering on the current state of science education in America. Several audience members raised questions regarding what they perceived as the "dumbing of America." These attendees cited efforts by political and religious leaders to implement science curriculum that omits topics such as evolution. The audience also voiced their concern over declining levels of scientific knowledge among students in the United States relative to those in countries like China. Matthews responded that instances of biased curriculum likely demonstrate an

"avoidance of difficult issues" rather than an active effort to "dumb down" American citizens. Lane explained that teachers at the primary and secondary level are often not given the resources and scientific training they need to effectively pass on such knowledge to their students. Lane and Matthews highlighted the importance of training teachers so that they can enable their students to become active consumers of scientific research.

Event attendee Shatia Safford agreed with Lane and Matthews about the need for improved science curriculum. Although she is religious, Safford stated that she would want her future children to have a well-rounded science education. She said that "it's ultimately up to kids to decide what's important," and believes that a balanced understanding of scientific issues would allow them to make an informed decision. Another attendee, Tom Leffler, appreciated Lane's full disclosure regarding his stance on political and scientific issues, and "thought his talk was excellent." Leffler expressed a hope that future talks will continue to explore the interplay of science, religion, and politics in order to promote public dialogue regarding these topics.

Religion, Immigration and Politics

By Samuel Kye, RPLP Post-Baccalaureate Fellow

In the U.S. today, nearly a fourth of the U.S. population is composed of immigrants and their children. How might immigrant experiences influence political action and what role might religion play in this process? Continuing to explore the theme of Religion in the 2012 elections, a conference session explored the contours of the immigrant vote, both for the upcoming election and in the years to come. Led by Elaine Howard Ecklund, associate professor of sociology and director of the Religion and Public Life Program, the discussion focused on the intersection of separate yet importantly related social phenomena: religion, immigration, and politics.



Elaine Howard Ecklund discusses religion and immigration