



DoSER

Dialogue on  
Science, Ethics,  
& Religion

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# Perceptions: Science and Religious Communities

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Final Report  
March 2015



 #AAASPerceptions

## Perceptions Project Advisory Committee

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## Introduction: Science, Religious Communities, and Perceptions

Cross-community dialogue of all types can be challenging. When it comes to communication between scientists and religious communities, numerous polls of the American public indicate that this interface can be among the most difficult.

The American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) Dialogue on Science, Ethics, and Religion (DoSER) launched the Perceptions Project in 2012 to dig deep into the roots of the perceptions and misunderstandings that can hinder interactions between these communities. Using comprehensive survey data and professionally facilitated dialogue, the project helped to dismantle stereotypes and build the kinds of human relationships that have the potential to reframe national discourse around a variety of scientific topics.

After three years of strategic work, DoSER has uncovered some encouraging findings. For one, both scientists and religious communities seem eager to improve dialogue, interactions, and mutual understanding, even when there is not always agreement. Furthermore, by spending meaningful time together, scientists and religious leaders begin to understand and appreciate one another. More is achieved in this way than by simply contemplating the relationship of “science” and “religion” in the abstract.

This report describes the purposes and processes that led to these and other insights from the Perceptions Project. It also outlines some of the resulting recommendations and outcomes. A full archive of data, program reports, and videos can be found at [aaas.org/DoSER](http://aaas.org/DoSER). May these efforts and findings spawn more fruitful dialogue across society, promoting the AAAS goal of “advancing science for the benefit of all people.”

Jennifer Wiseman, Director  
AAAS Dialogue on Science, Ethics, and Religion



## Introduction: Science, Religious Communities, and Perceptions

“Real engagement in dialogue allows the scientist to learn what are the specific concerns and arguments offered by those who resist mainline scientific findings.”

– Alan Leshner, AAAS CEO Emeritus

When it comes to public understanding of and support for science from the large and varied sector of religious communities, it is the perception of the role of science and of scientists themselves—e.g. their motives, expertise, and influence—that often carries the most weight. Likewise the perceptions of scientists toward religious communities greatly impact their effectiveness in science engagement. Misperceptions between scientific and religious communities can have measurable impacts on national attitudes toward science, and ultimately on national science policy.

“Science has never been more productive. And yet, the overall climate for science is more difficult than I have ever seen in my scientific career,” Alan Leshner said in a February 2015 Op-Ed before he retired as CEO of AAAS and Executive Publisher of the Science family of journals. “A weakened science-society relationship not only undermines public support for science but also makes it difficult for science to contribute to the solutions of societal problems,” said Leshner.<sup>1</sup>

With a grant from the John Templeton Foundation and support from AAAS, the Perceptions Project was launched in April 2012 as one of many initiatives that AAAS is pursuing to address this challenge. The project used comprehensive new data from a nationwide survey conducted by AAAS and sociologists at Rice University, along with facilitated dialogue, to unearth the root causes of misperceptions, to find areas of common ground, and to increase understanding between scientific and religious communities.

### Why Evangelicals?

The project involved four religious groups—Catholics, Mainline Protestants, Jews, and Evangelicals—but primarily focused on the Evangelical Christian community. Evangelicals constitute as much as 30% of the U.S. population,<sup>2</sup> and their influence on public support for and perceptions of science is considerable. AAAS advisory groups had long recommended focus on the relationship between science and Evangelicals because of their prominence, their interest in truth and public policy, and their sometimes wary relationship with science. (Catholics, Mainline Protestants, and Jews represent large U.S. constituencies and were included to test the potential for wider application of the project’s insights.)

At its first meeting, the project’s advisory committee—comprised of scientists, sociologists, science advocates, and religious leaders—concluded that scientists are most concerned about Evangelicals when the latter are seen as interfering with scientific work on issues like human embryonic stem-cell research, origins, and climate change.

“Scientists may feel that the progress of their research will be impeded by the religiously-motivated objections of others. Furthermore, some are concerned that the influence Evangelicals have over



Facilitated dialogue was key to project success. | Pasadena

education may affect the quantity and quality of future American scientists,” the committee said. Nonetheless, the group noted that “scientists often find allies in Evangelicals who invest in medical missions and the dissemination of health information and resources.”

Thus it was determined by AAAS advisors that it is with this community that the greatest improvements in the science and religion dialogue may be possible.

In order to better understand Evangelicals, AAAS partnered with the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), a membership organization that “represents more than 45,000 local churches from 40 different denominations.”<sup>3</sup>

Early in the project, NAE President Leith Anderson explained that “Evangelicals often harbor a variety of suspicions and concerns regarding the scientific establishment both in terms of how it works and what scientists believe.” They are often unaware of what motivates scientists and what their agenda is, said Anderson. Scientists can be perceived as being “triumphalist or arrogantly dismissive when encountering differing viewpoints.”

“These suspicions weaken the authority of science within Evangelicalism,” Anderson said, noting also that “Evangelicals often are simply uninformed or unsure about the scientific establishment itself.” They don’t often hear sermons about science in church, even though congregations may be involved in practical engagement with science through medical missions, health initiatives, and community service collaborations like disaster relief and environmental efforts, he said.

Isaac Rowlett, Senior Public Engagement Associate for project partner Public Agenda (a nonprofit, non-partisan opinion research and public engagement organization), facilitated three Perceptions

Project workshops between scientists and Evangelicals. He said challenges to dialogue include “a mistaken belief among scientists that ‘more information’ will solve the [miscommunication] problem.” What’s needed from both groups is humility “about the totality of their knowledge, both about themselves and the other.”

Endeavors like the Perceptions Project that “generate media attention and demonstrate to the world the possibility for narratives that run counter to conventional conflict stories” can help, said Rowlett.

Eugenie Scott, a Perceptions Project advisor and Chair of the advisory committee for the National Center for Science Education (NCSE), provided valuable insights throughout the project. Scott said low levels of both scientific and theological literacy in the U.S. contribute to cross-community misunderstanding.

“Science is a way of knowing about the natural world. It can inform religious and philosophical positions, but it is not in itself a philosophical system. It’s an equal opportunity sub-stratum for theistic and non-theistic views. ... I see a big challenge in recognizing what science does best and what religion/philosophy does best—rendering unto science those things that are science’s and rendering unto religion those things that are religion’s,” Scott said.

Uniquely informed by data, experience, and the resources it developed, the project reached beyond elite leaders to the heart of religious communities to grapple with these challenges, with the goal of seeding a sea-change in national discourse about science.

1 Leshner, Alan, “Passing the CEO Baton,” *Science*, vol. 347 no. 6222 (Feb. 2015), 587.

2 “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey,” Pew Research Center, February 2008.

3 [nae.net/about](http://nae.net/about) (retrieved April 29, 2015).

### AAAS/Rice Survey Highlights About Evangelicals

- Evangelicals (20%) are nearly as likely as other members of the general public (25%) to read a full article about a new scientific discovery if a headline drew their attention to it.
- Evangelicals consult scientists about scientific questions at equal rates with the general public (14%), but are more than twice as likely as other respondents to look to a religious leader for answers to such questions (10% v. 4%).
- 48% of Evangelicals and 38% of other respondents said science and religion can work in collaboration, but Evangelicals are more than twice as likely (29% v. 14%) to agree that “science and religion are in conflict and I am on the side of religion.” 21% of Evangelicals agree that “science and religion refer to different aspects of reality.”
- More than half of Evangelical scientists (57%) agreed that “most scientists are hostile to religion,” whereas only 37% of other Evangelicals and 24% of all scientists agreed with this statement.

## Project Summary: Preliminary Work

Drawing on data from a nationwide survey and discussions with focus groups, the Perceptions Project brought together scientists and religious leaders (especially Evangelicals) for conversation about how members of these influential communities view one another and how relations between them can be improved.

The survey of nearly 10,000 Americans was a joint project of AAAS and sociologists led by Elaine Howard Ecklund at Rice University. It looked at the views of rank-and-file scientists—including those working in industry or medicine, for example—and sought to discern how religious Americans perceive scientists and science, and how scientists perceive them. Preliminary results of the survey were presented at the 2014 AAAS Annual Meeting<sup>4</sup> in Chicago and received international media attention, demonstrating high public interest in this field of inquiry.

The data (see sidebars, pages 3 and 8) provided a foundation for a series of highly successful conversations.

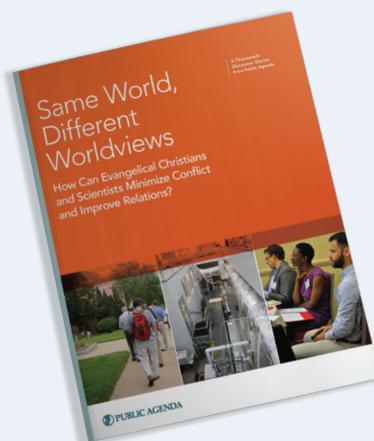
Between May 2014 and March 2015, more than 500 people—research and rank-and-file scientists, pastors, and other faith leaders—met for up to two days of dialogue in a series of facilitated meetings. These conversations spanned the nation and were organized in collaboration with various project partners, including NAE,

Public Agenda, the American Scientific Affiliation (ASA—a membership organization for Christians in science), and Sinai & Synapses (an organization that seeks to improve the tenor of science/religion dialogue in Jewish communities). At each event, attendees and organizers discovered how quickly warm, cordial relationships could form and how much respect could accompany discussion, even around areas of conflict.

Three community-based workshops were planned to bring together up to 30 scientists and evangelical leaders to explore issues of mutual interest and concern. The events—strategically hosted in Pasadena, Denver, and Atlanta—were designed not only to increase positive understanding between these groups, but also to provide models from which other religious groups can develop activities for their own communities.

In preparing for the workshops, DoSER drew upon guidelines developed by Daniel Yankelovitch, co-founder of Public Agenda. In his book, “The Magic of Dialogue: Transforming Conflict into Cooperation,” Yankelovitch highlighted three guidelines for dialogue:

1. All participants must be treated as equals.
2. Participants should listen with empathy and suspend judgment.



### Same World, Different Worldviews

A key resource of the Perceptions Project was a focus-group and workshop tested discussion starter created in collaboration with project partner Public Agenda. “Same World, Different Worldviews” offers three alternative approaches for improving relations between scientific and religious communities. However, many participants opted for either an entirely different approach or a combination of approaches, depending on context:

- A: Build Common Ground – explore shared values and promote understanding
- B: Increase Collaboration – work together to confront common concerns
- C: Simplify Relations – ensure civility and minimize confrontation
- D: Other approaches or a combination of approaches

3. Assumptions should be brought out into the open.<sup>5</sup>

These and other ground rules were designed to establish a respectful, constructive tone in which mutual understanding could develop.

A discussion starter, “Same World, Different Worldviews,” was developed in collaboration with Public Agenda and tested in two focus groups for use in the workshops and with other religious groups. The guide proposes three alternative engagement models for improving relations between scientific and evangelical communities and can also be adapted for use with other groups (see sidebar, page 4).

The discussion starter “creates a level playing field for diverse participants by providing neutral background information about an issue; helps participants move past unproductive false dichotomies and encourages creative thinking by framing issues with three, rather than two, approaches to addressing a problem; and,

makes areas of common ground and disagreement explicit by encouraging participants to select an approach that comes closest to their own perspective, allowing everyone to articulate their perspective,” said Rowlett.

With preliminary work done and a structure in place to support productive dialogue, DoSER staff—including Program Director Jennifer Wiseman, Project Director Se Kim, Senior Program Associates Paul Arveson and Christine Scheller, Program Associate David Buller, and AAAS Center of Science, Policy, and Society Programs Meeting Planner Bethany Spencer—traveled the country, hosting the highly productive workshops that were at the heart of the Perceptions Project.

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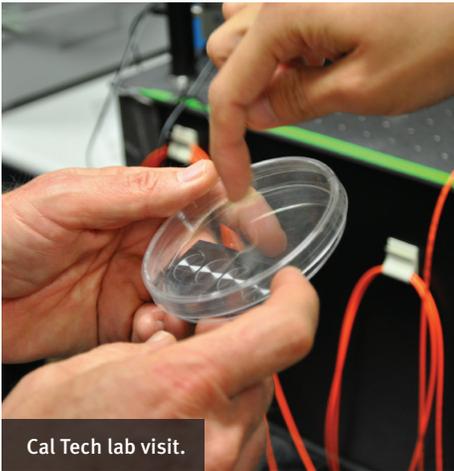
4 Ecklund, Elaine Howard and Scheitle, Chris, “Religious Communities, Science, Scientists, and Perceptions: A Comprehensive Survey,” February 16, 2014; presented at 2014, AAAS Annual Meeting, Chicago, Illinois. Available for Download at [aaas.org/page/doser-downloads](http://aaas.org/page/doser-downloads)

5 Yankelovitch, Daniel, “The Magic of Dialogue: Transforming Conflict Into Cooperation” (Chicago: Touchstone, reprint 2001).



Lab visits brought fresh insights | Colorado School of Mines, Golden.

## Project Summary: Evangelical Workshops



Workshops with Evangelicals and scientists were not intended to build consensus on particular controversial issues, but rather to generate discussion on what the barriers and opportunities are for better dialogue and understanding between these communities when discussing issues related to science and technology. Conflicts were not dismissed. Instead the relaxed, yet structured format of the workshops (see sidebar below) allowed for a variety of perspectives to be shared.

Glenn Stanton, director of Family Formation Studies at the evangelical ministry Focus on the Family, attended the Denver workshop and the project's concluding conference.

“As a representative in the faith community, these gatherings have been tremendously beneficial, if for no other reason than that it allows me to hear from various working scientists,” Stanton said.

Additionally, highlighting the importance of trust as a key factor in science communication, Stanton noted

the benefit of connecting with scientists who could talk with faith audiences about science without alienating them.

“The voices most often heard by the public are those seeking to emphasize a rift between science and belief, but the voices most needed are those recognizing the compatibility of the two,” said Paul Santi, Department Head of Geology and Geological Engineering at the Colorado School of Mines

When discussing ways to minimize unnecessary conflict and improve relations between scientists and Evangelicals (labels that overlap for more people than is commonly assumed), workshop participants were asked to consider what the potential benefits are to each discussion starter approach, what might work best for their particular communities, and what other approaches they might suggest.

With the first option, common values such as service, compassion, truth-seeking, and perseverance were discussed. With the second, avenues of possible collaboration—health,



### Elements of Facilitated Dialogue

- ✓ Recruitment aimed at scientists working in industry, government, and academic sectors and evangelical leaders and educators
- ✓ Neutral location and privacy protections
- ✓ Pre- and post- event online surveys
- ✓ Clear communication of goals and ground rules
- ✓ Keynote talk from a local scientist on some aspect of science-religion interaction
- ✓ Two small group discussions, one of which utilized the “Choicework” discussion guide
- ✓ Field trips to a local science lab and/or religious institution
- ✓ Plenary session to summarize comments of the participants
- ✓ Video-recorded interviews with volunteer participants
- ✓ Conversation during field trips and shared meals

education, poverty, environmental stewardship, human rights—were outlined. The third category, summarized as “separate but civil,” seemed to appeal most when it came to areas of stalemated disagreement, for example, origins.

At all three workshops participants said spending extended time together helped dismantle the stereotypes and prejudices that can lead to misunderstanding.

Still, there were notable regional differences. In Pasadena, a few religious scientists were surprised by the views of their fellow believers. Areas of concern ranged from what some considered antiscientific views among their peers to what others considered accommodation to a materialistic worldview. In Denver, participants noted a lack of shared vocabulary and different worldviews as contributors to misunderstandings between scientific and religious communities. In Atlanta, where Evangelicals make up a significant portion of the population, conversations included a higher level of conflict than in other regions of the country.

Overall, there was general appreciation for what Elaine Howard Ecklund terms “boundary pioneers<sup>1</sup>,” religious scientists with affiliations in both worlds who can help bridge gaps between these groups. A religiously oriented scientist, for

example, said the Pasadena workshop was one of the few times in his 30-year career that he has been able to discuss the science/religion intersection with people whose knowledge and judgment he respects. “For the previous 30 years, I pretty much kept all of this to myself,” the scientist said.

DoSER director Jennifer Wiseman thought there might be disinterest, especially among scientists, for participating in workshops of dialogue with evangelical leaders. Instead, she was surprised by the interest of influential science leaders, including high-ranking research deans and academic department chairs. “We even had scientists disappointed because we didn’t have space to fit them in,” said Wiseman.

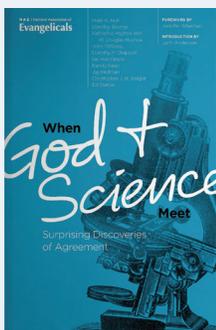
The most gratifying workshop moments for her were when participants expressed appreciation for the opportunity to interact with members of the other group. “This is when I realized that all the public banter about science and religion is a poor substitute for having thoughtful scientists and religious people spending time talking with each other,” Wiseman said.

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<sup>1</sup> Ecklund, Elaine Howard, “Science vs. Religion: What Scientists Really Think,” (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

“What happens when you put people of various faiths in a room, and then add a bunch of scientists, some of whom are believers in God? ... Add DoSER to the mix and something wonderful happens—conversations start!”

– Warren Was, Senior Pastor, Luxomni Baptist Church, Lilburn, Georgia



### When God & Science Meet: Surprising Discoveries of Agreement

This collection of essays from leading evangelical scientists, pastors, and scholars was produced by the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) in collaboration with AAAS for distribution by NAE to its members. Topics include the history of science and Christianity, the wonder of creation, the competencies and limits of science, creativity and the development of technology, and reasons to engage in science. In his introduction, NAE President Leith Anderson said the goal of the booklet is “not to answer all the questions but to unite conversation in a way that values and respects both science and faith.” The booklet is available through NAE’s website.

## Project Summary: Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish Workshops

Workshops with other faith traditions followed, bringing the project’s data and experiences directly to Catholic, Mainline Protestant, and Jewish communities. Because survey data indicated that these groups do not perceive high levels of conflict with mainstream science (see sidebar below), the conversations were conducted using different frameworks.

A November 2014 workshop focused on the intersection of science and Judaism. With assistance from Rabbi Geoffrey A. Mitelman, founding director of Sinai & Synapses, a diverse group of Jewish leaders and scientists gathered at Clal - The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership in New York City for a full day of conversation. The workshop sought to seed ideas for future science engagement in Jewish communities.

There was general consensus among participants that the reason for this congenial relationship is that “Judaism is not only based on the Bible, but on the Talmud,” which includes a range of rabbinical perspectives.

Scientific areas of particular interest to the group—which ranged from non-practicing to Reform to Orthodox—were identity, medical ethics and end-of-life issues, along with the creation/evolution debate.

Attendees said this debate is a concern in some Jewish communities in part because of the theological importance of the creation of humanity. The classic view of evolution is based on randomness and error, a rabbi said. This core view doesn’t sit well with a Jewish perspective that says the human person has an intended spot and particular purpose in the world, he explained.

Recommendations for future science engagement included workshops for rabbinical students and teachers, curriculum development, and incorporating discussions about science into Jewish community and family life.

For the Mainline Protestant and Catholic workshops (held at AAAS’ Washington D.C. headquarters in early 2015), DoSER sought to identify specific actions that can improve science engagement within these faith communities. A self-assessment tool was used to help each religious group evaluate its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges (SWOC) in regard to dialogue about science.

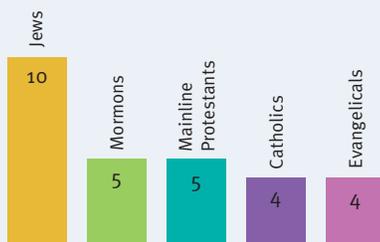
These four dimensions provided a helpful overview from which small sub-groups of participants collaborated to brainstorm practical ideas for improving science engagement. The sub-groups



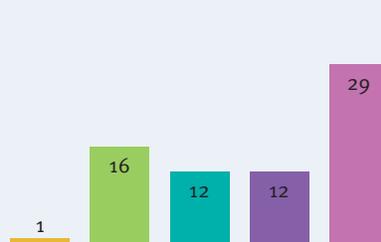
Recorders supported discussion.

### Catholic, Mainline Protestant, and Jewish Survey Stats

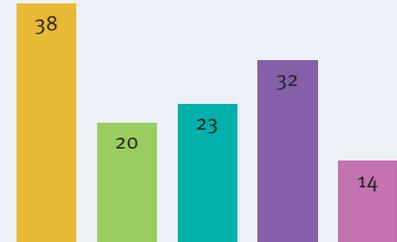
% of respondents in comparative religious groups who are scientists



% who say science and religion are in conflict, and that they are on the side of religion



% who say given enough time science will be able to provide a natural explanation to everything



then came together to develop a short list of the most popular recommendations from these ideas.

### Mainline Protestants and Catholics

It should come as no surprise that the interests and concerns of Mainline Protestants and Catholics in regard to science are as diverse as the groups themselves. Consistent with findings in previous workshops, meetings with these groups demonstrated that each community's interests are informed by its unique worldview and engagement with sacred text and tradition. However, there was overlap in these workshops.

“When I talk to our members about religion and science, their response is a jaded one. ... ‘We know that evolution is compatible with scripture.’ In other words, they only see the important issue as differentiating themselves from the ‘evangelical view.’ Us and them,” said a Mainline Protestant participant. A good follow-up question for those members might be to ask if they have integrated the two (religion and science) in their own minds.”

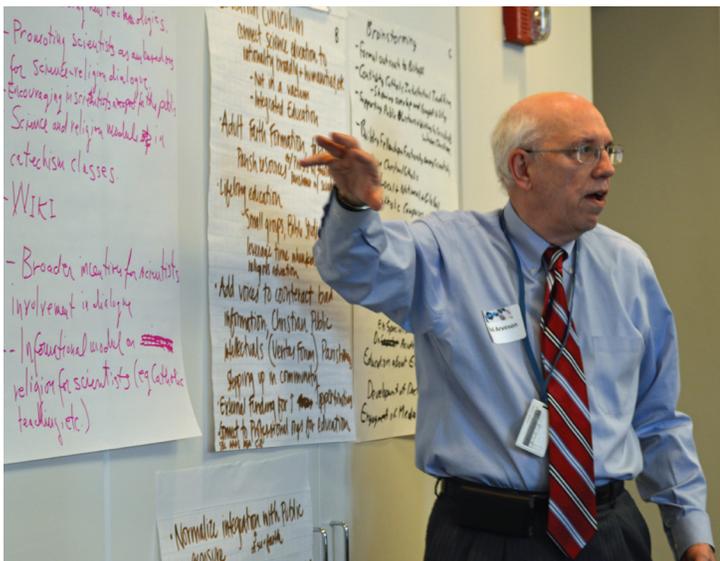
“Finding a way to build up fellowship

and confidence among Catholics working in the academic sciences is a useful and maybe even necessary precursor to having them be more active and public about their faith. Too often they may feel alone or discouraged about being a believer in the sciences and afraid to speak publicly,” said a Catholic attendee. Providing places and times to encourage these scientists in their faith and in their work as scientists would help, this person said.

Other suggestions for better science engagement within these communities included encouraging science organizations to increase their public outreach to religious communities and encouraging religious organizations to improve their engagement with science through denominational education channels and dialogue with denominational leaders. Additionally, participants at the Mainline Protestant workshop advocated getting a “Mainline view of science and religion” into the media through letters to the editor, op-eds, and relationships with journalists. In this way, they said a broader view of religious attitudes toward science can reach the general public.

“My underlying conflict is that as a scientist I’m trained to look for answers; as a rabbi I’m taught to live with questions.”

—Science and Judaism workshop participant



Brainstorming ideas was central to Catholic and Mainline Protestant workshops.

## Project Summary: National Conference

“Scientists have a responsibility to interpret their science to the general public and that general public ... is largely made up of religious folk.”

—William D. Phillips, Physics Nobel Laureate

Highlights and products from the project were shared with the wider public at a national conference in Washington, D.C., on March 13, 2015. “Perceptions: Science and Religious Communities” brought together more than 200 scientists, clergy, environmentalists, public health specialists, journalists, people of faith, and other interested members of the public. A large part of the day was spent dispelling stereotypes and finding areas, such as improving global health and environmental stewardship, where scientific and religious communities can work together on shared goals.

The conference was held at the Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center and featured leaders in science and religion—including Nobel Prize-winning physicist William D. Phillips, AAAS CEO Rush Holt, Texas Tech University climate scientist Katharine Hayhoe, and Rick Potts, director of the Human Origins program at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History.

Plenary sessions bookended discussion tracks on two themes: Challenges and Opportunities in Science Dialogue and Strategies for Improving Dialogue.

Challenges and opportunities were

explored around three topics: origins, global health, and environmental stewardship. Consistent with project goals, these discussions did not seek consensus on specific issues. Instead, participants were asked to identify why discussions around these topical areas can be challenging, where promising opportunities lie, and what advice they would give to scientists and religious leaders seeking to advance understanding and better dialogue.

For example, Potts drew upon his expertise as a paleoanthropologist for his talk on the origins panel. He said one important question — “What does it mean to be human?” — is not something that can be answered by science alone. “It is something where there can be common ground,” Potts said, “where the inspiration and the foundation of insight that comes from religion, philosophy, literature, everyday experience” can be brought to bear. “Science is not the whole answer to that question.”

Galen Carey, vice president for government relations at NAE and a former employee of its development arm World Relief, attended all three workshops with Evangelicals and moderated the global health panel. Carey emphasized the fact that global health is an area in



Perceptions conference catalyzed new discussions.



which religious communities can and have made a difference. “Science gives us tools and understanding of disease and disease prevention, but unless that knowledge is translated into communities in the remotest parts of the world, it is not effective,” Carey said. “It is faith groups that are present in every village and community throughout the world.” When scientists and faith groups work together, he said, “We’ve seen tremendous successes.”

Strategies for improving dialogue centered on helping scientists engage with a largely religious public, learning how and why journalists report on the science/religion interface the way they do, and cultivating good science communication in religious congregations.

For example, Science in Congregations panel moderator, project advisor, and ASA Executive Director Randy Isaac said congregational leaders should seek out scientists within their congregations or communities and try to better understand their perspectives.

“As a leader of your congregation, you do not need to become an expert in science but to ensure that scientists are welcome and that resources are available. In a world that is too often polarized, it is important to show that there are many Christians in science who have grappled with perceived conflicts and have demonstrated the underlying harmony of science and faith,” said Isaac.

Deadline and market pressures can give the impression that journalists attempt to create controversy, said project advisor, pastor of Bridgeway Community Church in Columbia, Maryland, and radio host David Anderson after moderating the Science and Religion in the Media panel. “Media folks should make sure that they are careful to get voices from the religious community that are vetted, represent a broad swath of the religious community,

and not simply give the microphone (or pen) to the loudest and most extreme voices,” Anderson said.

Attendee survey responses and news accounts of the event were overwhelmingly positive (see sidebar).

“I started off my career as an Aerospace Engineer. I either wanted to go to the moon ... or design vehicles that could,” said an NAE board member. “Science was a huge part of my background. When I entered seminary and the church world I found myself in the position of feeling the pressure of seemingly having to make a choice between science and faith ... leaving either my soul or my brain at the door. This conference was a breath of fresh air of hearing people being able to exist freely in both worlds.”

Even AAAS staff members found the conference enlightening. One person said, “I realized that I bring biases of my own to conversations with (and attitudes towards) very religious audiences. It was incredibly helpful to have conversations with or hear on panels scientists I hold in great esteem quoting scripture and otherwise fully embracing their religious identity. It was a humbling experience, but one that I am so glad I had!”

All conference sessions were videotaped and are archived for public viewing (<http://www.aaas.org/page/doser-resources>) so that these rich discussions can reach a broader range of the American public. Additionally, “When God & Science Meet,” a collection of science essays authored by evangelical scientists, scholars, and pastors, was produced in collaboration with NAE to help address barriers to science acceptance among Evangelicals. It is available through NAE’s website (see sidebar p. 7).

## Conference Exit Survey

- 59% of conference attendees were Protestants (43% of whom were Evangelicals). Other attendees were Catholic (9%); Jewish (7%); Agnostic/Atheist (6%); LDS (4%); Muslim (2%); Orthodox Christian (1%); and Other (12%).
- The Origins panel was, by far, the most popular discussion track. This was followed by Science Engagement in Congregations, Science and Religion in the Media, and Science and the Religious Public.
- 93% of attendees agreed that “increased contact between scientists and Evangelical Christians is important for the health of science discourse in the U.S.”
- 79% left the conference with a “better understanding of the various interests and concerns of the scientific community and/or religious communities.” 91% of Evangelicals agreed with this statement.

## Next Steps: Participant Recommendations



The Perceptions Project officially came to a close on March 31, 2015, but its objectives did not come to an end. The project was designed to be a starting point for improved dialogue and understanding between scientists and religious groups (especially Evangelicals). Recommendations for next steps were varied, but thematically consistent.

One oft-repeated recommendation urged respect for different worldviews. "Often points of contention, whether from scientific or religious communities, reflect divergent understandings about the sources of knowledge and the methods of gaining such knowledge. It can be challenging to attain a sympathetic appreciation of those different epistemological frames of references, much less learn to correlate them sensibly," said Walter Kim, a Perceptions conference speaker and Associate Pastor of Park Street Church in Boston.

An "agree to disagree" approach is convenient when trying to reconcile differing ways of knowing, but people seek meaning and connection in a world that is "not always informed by the physical laws that govern the world of science," added Mark Lee, an Atlanta workshop participant and Associate Professor of Biology at Spelman College.

"For the greater good to the broader community, we can no longer choose to operate in isolation. This isolation undermines connections that we share. ... Deeper connections between these groups of community leaders will be well served by the vision and courage of societies like AAAS to foster further dialogue, common ground and shared service projects for the greater community," said Lee.

Steven L'Hernault, Professor and Chair of the Department of Biology at Emory University and an Atlanta workshop participant, was among those who

advised a focus on K-12 education.

"Students would then develop as more scientifically literate while they are developing their religious convictions. The challenge is how to take this approach without alienating religious communities," said L'Hernault.

A challenge for churches in fostering better science engagement is "bandwidth," said Focus on the Family's Glenn Stanton. "There are so many other topics and areas that pastors feel they need to train their people in that come before this one."

Bandwidth is also a challenge for scientists, said Praveen Sethupathy, a project advisor and geneticist at the UNC Chapel Hill School of Medicine. Academic scientific environments are "not a space where it is generally safe and free to talk about anything other than science," he said. Particularly for younger scientists, doing or talking about anything other than science can be judged as a compromise to the rigor of their work.

"This is not unique to just science and faith. It's true of science and art, science and philosophy, and whatever else where there may be some tension. That's one of the reasons why it's really hard to motivate scientists who may even have an interest in this topic to really bring it to the forefront because there doesn't seem to be a lot of bang for the buck for them. In many instances, it feels as if they may be jeopardizing their careers," said Sethupathy.

The solution is to change the underlying culture, he said. "AAAS has an enormous stature in the scientific community, and has a lot of leverage to think about what it can do to address this issue" by helping to make it acceptable in these environments to talk about science and art, or science and ethics, or science and spirituality.

Finding ways to reach beyond moderate voices is a vital next step that

numerous project contributors advocated.

“The workshops seemed to be well-stocked with Evangelicals and scientists who already recognize the importance for communication with the other group. I think it is time to engage people from each group who are not aware of the need for the conversation,” said Denver workshop participant Paul Santi.

Eric Chang, English pastor at Atlanta Chinese Christian Church North, sees a need for social structures that bring together efforts from government, the science community, and faith communities. “As a lead pastor of an ethnic community that has traditionally strong vocational ties to science, one of the great needs I see is for resources and structures within our society that will develop and nurture the valuing of science,” said Chang.

DoSER is pursuing many avenues

through which to build upon insights from the Perceptions Project. In the fall of 2014, the Science for Seminaries project was launched to support 10 pilot seminaries from diverse traditions as they incorporate more science into their core curricula, thus enabling clergy to have better exposure to science in their training and for their future ministries. In April 2015, Forefront Science for Religion Reporters was launched as a pilot project to increase science exposure among religion reporters, and a future Engaging Scientists project is in development to aid scientists in their communications efforts with religious students and audiences.

Through these and many other efforts, DoSER will make use of the insights from this project as it pursues AAAS’ mission of advancing science for the benefit of all people.



Perceptions conference.



## PERCEPTIONS PARTNERS

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## ABOUT AAAS | DOSER

The American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) seeks to advance science, engineering, and innovation throughout the world for the benefit of all people. AAAS established the Dialogue on Science, Ethics, and Religion (DoSER) program in 1995 to facilitate communication and understanding between scientific and religious communities. For more information about AAAS, visit [AAAS.org](http://AAAS.org). The Perceptions Project was primarily funded by a grant from the John Templeton Foundation, with support from AAAS.

The opinions expressed in the report do not necessarily reflect the views of the John Templeton Foundation.

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