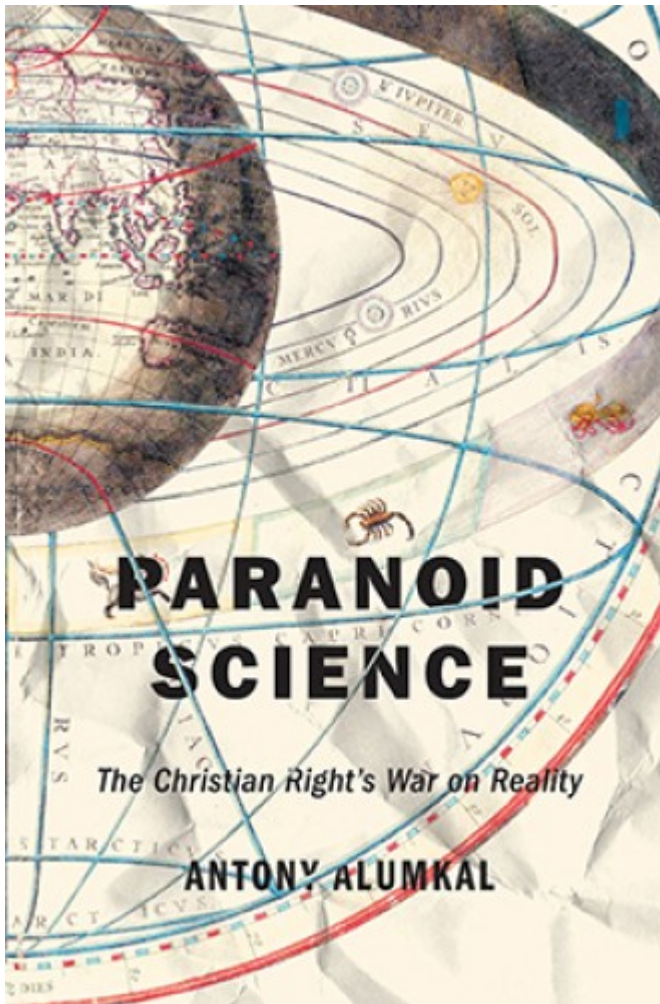


Is evangelicalism at war with science?

It depends which evangelicals you're asking.

by [David J. Wood](#) in the [January 16, 2019](#) issue

In Review

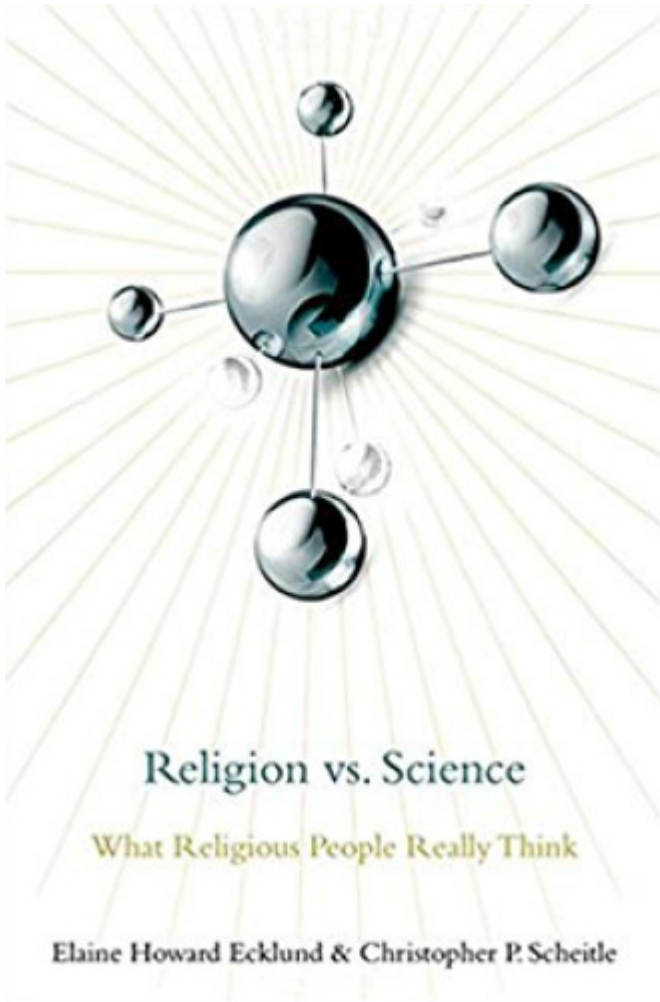


Paranoid Science

The Christian Right's War on Reality

By Antony Alumkal

NYU Press



Religion vs. Science

What Religious People Really Think

By Elaine Howard Ecklund and Christopher P. Scheitle
Oxford University Press

With every news cycle, it becomes increasingly apparent that Richard Hofstadter's 1964 essay "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" is still relevant. Antony Almkal summarizes Hofstadter's take on the politics of paranoia as the view that there is "a vast conspiracy, a gigantic yet subtle machinery of influence sent in motion to undermine and destroy a way of life." It is characterized by "heated exaggeration, suspicion, and conspiratorial fantasy." This is the lens, Almkal argues, that helps us make sense of the Christian right's use and misuse of science.

Alumkal works out his thesis in relation to four issues of contention: intelligent design, the ex-gay movement (i.e., conversion therapy), bioethics, and climate change. As his study makes clear, the so-called Christian right is not so much antiscience as it is concerned about defining what counts as pure and legitimate science. The baseline test for legitimate science is that its findings do not run counter to a straightforward, literal reading of the Bible. Alumkal makes a strong case for the determinative role of biblical authority and interpretation in the negotiation between science and faith for conservative evangelicals. However, his descriptions of how that negotiation unfolds fall into the same sort of exaggeration and suspicion that he otherwise decries.

In the evangelical mind-set that Alumkal describes, evolution is regarded with grave suspicion because it promotes a worldview that has no need of a Creator God. At the same time, the scientific finding that our planet is fine-tuned for the flourishing of life is embraced because it affirms and provides evidence for God as Creator and sustainer of all things. Similarly, the science that (until the late 1970s) regarded homosexuality as a mental disorder that could be “corrected” with therapy is legitimate because it corresponds to the biblical account of the inextricable tie between gender identity, sexual desire, and heterosexual marriage. The science that gives evidence for the fluidity of gender formation and sexual identity is rejected because it contradicts what the Bible teaches. The science that makes the case for humanity’s capacity to negatively impact the earth’s atmosphere is dubious because it goes against a biblical understanding of the sovereignty of God, who has designed all things well and determines the outcome of history.

In the context of the Christian right, Alumkal argues, science and religion are locked in a pitched battle for the heart and soul of humanity. Nothing less than the fabric of American society is at stake. From this perspective, the enemy is not science itself but rather those who utilize science as a cover for atheistic philosophical naturalism. In the end, Alumkal’s account leaves little hope for a way out of enduring hostilities.

Whereas Alumkal reinforces liberal Christians’ worst assumptions about conservative evangelicals, Elaine Howard Ecklund and Christopher P. Scheitle call into question those same assumptions. They explore two questions that shape how religious people approach science: “What does science mean for the existence and activity of God?” and “What does science mean for the sacredness of humanity?” They contend that these questions express the legitimate concerns of people of faith across the theological spectrum.

Drawing on their observations of congregations, in-depth face-to-face interviews, and a national survey of over 10,000 individuals, Ecklund and Scheitle provide an engaging account of the diversity of views within evangelical Christianity that left me feeling considerably more hopeful and less paranoid. Each chapter takes up a common myth concerning the way religious people relate to science. They address the stereotypes that Christians do not like science, do not like scientists, are not scientists, are Young Earth Creationists, are climate change deniers, and are against scientific technology. In each case, their data shows how the stereotype is incorrect. Christians, including evangelicals, are not as easily categorized into right, center, and left as Alumkal's narrative would suggest. They also show that evangelicals are much less rigid in relation to reading scripture and much more receptive to scientific findings than Alumkal supposes.

This disagreement between the books may be related to their difference in sources. While Alumkal's account focuses on the leading public voices of the Christian right's war on science, Eckland and Scheitle listen to the voices of evangelical Christians on the ground of congregational life.

I have worked for several years with grant programs designed to cultivate a more substantive engagement with science on the part of mainline and evangelical congregations. Interestingly, both volumes emphasize that this kind of effort is critical to generate a more collaborative relationship between science and faith. Alumkal concludes that for constructive change to occur, it "will involve moderate to liberal Christian congregations educating members about alternative ways of understanding faith and science, especially the long history of Christian theologies that affirm evolution." Eckland and Scheitle end with these words:

If scientists and people of faith are to begin to have more informed, meaningful, and productive relationship, scientists need to better understand how religious people really view science and scientists, and religious individuals need to better understand science and scientists . . . Both groups need to move beyond myths and stereotypes. The reality is that they need to listen to one another, learn from each other, and work together.

Where else will such mutual, collaborative engagement take place if not in congregations? In many congregations, scientists worship weekly alongside nonscientists. Yet rarely do congregations see their presence as an opportunity to

generate a new level of engagement between science and faith. The time is ripe for congregations to exemplify a way of life that does not mirror the politics of paranoia, conflict, and conspiracy that increasingly characterizes the public realm.