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**Crusading for Moral Authority:  
Christian Nationalism and Opposition to Science**

Joseph O. Baker<sup>1</sup>

Samuel L. Perry<sup>2</sup>

Andrew L. Whitehead<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Sociology & Anthropology, East Tennessee State University, Box 70644, Johnson City, TN 37614; E-mail: [bakerjo@etsu.edu](mailto:bakerjo@etsu.edu); Note: authorship shared equally, authors listed in alphabetical order.

<sup>2</sup> Department of Sociology, University of Oklahoma, 780 Van Vleet Oval, Norman, OK 73019; E-mail: [samperry@ou.edu](mailto:samperry@ou.edu).

<sup>3</sup> Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Criminal Justice, Clemson University, 132 Brackett Hall, Clemson, SC 29634; E-mail: [alw6@clemson.edu](mailto:alw6@clemson.edu).

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**Abstract**

Numerous studies show biblicist Christianity, religiosity, and conservative political identity are strong predictors of Americans holding skeptical attitudes toward publicly controversial aspects of science, such as human evolution. We show that Christian nationalism—meaning the desire to see particularistic and exclusivist versions of Christian symbols, values, and policies enshrined as the established religion of the United States—is a strong and consistent predictor of Americans’ attitudes about science above and beyond other religious and political characteristics. Further, a majority of the overall effect of political ideology on skepticism about the moral authority of science is mediated through Christian nationalism, indicating that political conservatives are more likely to be concerned with particular aspects of science primarily because they are more likely to be Christian nationalists. Likewise, substantial proportions of the well-documented associations between religiosity and biblical “literalism” with views of science are mediated through Christian nationalism. Because Christian nationalism seeks to establish a particular and exclusivist vision of Christianity as the dominant moral order, adherents feel threatened by challenges to the epistemic authority undergirding that order, including by aspects of science perceived as challenging the supremacy of biblicist authority.

**Keywords:** public understanding of science, moral authority, politics, religion, acceptance of evolution, creationism, Christian nationalism

## INTRODUCTION

Given the United States' relative wealth, technological advancement, and elite universities, it is ironic that compared to populations in other post-industrial countries Americans are more skeptical of the authority of science and scientists on controversial issues. The relative dominance of conservative religion in the United States helps explain these differences. Data from the 2010-2014 World Values Surveys (WVS), for example, show that Americans are more likely to agree with statements like: "Whenever science and religion conflict, religion is always right" (39%). The proportion of Americans affirming such statements is much higher compared to Germans (14%), Australians (13%), Swedes (7%), the Dutch (5%), or the Japanese (4%). Similarly, nearly half of Americans (49%) agree that "we depend too much on science and not enough on faith," compared to one-third of Germans (33%), roughly one quarter of Australians (28%) or the Dutch (24%), and around one-fifth of Japanese (22%) or Swedish (19%) respondents to the WVS.<sup>4</sup> While such suspicion of scientific authority does not mean a wholesale rejection of science, it can nonetheless have important consequences for particular issues where science is perceived as morally threatening or suspect.

Regarding one of the most visible and explicit conflicts between science and religion,

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<sup>4</sup> For the question about religion winning in "science vs. religion" conflicts, we combined respondents who said they strongly agreed or agreed. The "we depend too much on science" question had response options ranging from 1 ("completely disagree") to 10 ("completely agree"), so we used the proportion of respondents from each country's sample who selected 6 or higher. Reflecting the Western nature of the "science vs. religion" paradigm, Japanese respondents were by far the most likely to answer "don't know" to both questions.

Americans are more likely than those in other Western nations to reject evolution (Miller et al. 2006), and the proportion of the American public opposing or endorsing creationist narratives about the origins of humanity remained relatively stable between the early 1980s and 2000s (Plutzer and Berkman 2008). In the past ten years there has been a slight increase in the percentage of Americans who accept the evolutionary origins of humans, but nearly two out of five Americans (38%) still say that “God created humans in their present form” (Swift 2017; see also Pew Research Center 2015).<sup>5</sup> Part of Americans’ uniqueness in this regard stems from the historically (and increasingly) close connection between conservative religion and politics in the U.S. (Gorski 2017a). Indeed, polling data from the Pew Research Center show that Republicans and white evangelicals are much more likely to reject both anthropogenic climate change and human evolution (Rainie et al. 2015). Although there are important differences in the predictors of opposition to evolution and the science on climate change—particularly that resistance to climate change is rooted primarily in economic ideology (Longo and Baker 2014)—both are nonetheless based on a propositional distrust of scientific authority.

High levels of skepticism and distrust of scientific authority have a number of negative social consequences, ranging from low levels of acceptance about basic (but theologically controversial) scientific findings on matters like human evolution, to using skepticism toward science as a political and rhetorical technique to combat action on matters such as climate change (see Pilkey and Pilkey 2011: 42–52; Tom 2018), and even extending to matters of public health

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<sup>5</sup> The estimated proportion of the public that accepts or rejects evolution is highly susceptible to changes in question wording (Bader and Finke 2014; Funk 2019). The trends reported here are based on Gallup polls, which have used the same question wording since 1981.

such as opposition to vaccines (Hamilton et al. 2015). Concern about the authority of science has even been codified into law in some American states such as Mississippi, Louisiana, and Tennessee, which have passed “academic freedom” bills that allow for public school instructors to “teach the controversy” on matters such as evolution and climate change. For example, Tennessee House Bill 368, passed in 2012, reads:

The teaching of some scientific subjects, including, but not limited to, biological evolution, the chemical origins of life, global warming, and human cloning, can cause controversy.... Toward this end, teachers shall be permitted to help students understand, analyze, critique, and review in an objective manner the scientific strengths and scientific weaknesses of existing scientific theories covered in the course being taught.<sup>6</sup>

Cloaked in the rhetoric of objectivity and scientific critique, and purposefully shorn of religious language—even stating explicitly that the bill “shall not be construed to promote any religious or non-religious doctrine, promote discrimination for or against a particular set of religious beliefs or non-beliefs, or promote discrimination for or against religion or non-religion”—such measures provide legal cover for teaching skepticism about established science despite repeated applicable court rulings against the teaching of creationism in public schools (Matzke 2016).

In order to address public resistance to scientific authority among the American public, we must understand the sociological dimensions of these views. Recent empirical studies have documented many of the sources of skepticism toward publicly controversial aspects of science,

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<sup>6</sup> Full text of the Tennessee bill is available here:

<http://www.capitol.tn.gov/Bills/107/Bill/HB0368.pdf>.

including the politicization of trust in science (Gauchat 2012) and religious opposition to specific issues such as evolution and the perceived moral encroachment of science (Evans 2018; Johnson et al. 2015). In this study, we show that much of Americans' skepticism about the authority of science and scientists—skepticism that often seems motivated by fundamentalist religious beliefs and conservative politics—is often premised on Christian nationalism, a religio-political ideology that motivates a subset of American Christians to both lay claim to and contend for epistemic and moral authority in the public sphere. Drawing on national data containing multiple measures of both Christian nationalist ideology and science attitudes, we examine how Christian nationalism influences Americans' views about the authority of science and scientists. We also explore the extent to which Christian nationalism is the cultural mechanism linking the oft-observed connections between religion, politics, and science attitudes in the U.S. Previous research on public views of science, as well as on Christian nationalism, provided the foundation upon which we developed some specific expectations about how Christian nationalism relates to Americans' views of science.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Religion, Politics, and Public Opinion About Science**

Research has shown that individuals and communities identifying as textual “literalists” are more likely to oppose particular aspects of science, such as evolution and the Big Bang (Evans 2011; Tom 2018; Woodrum and Hoban 1992; also see Deckman 2002; Ecklund et al. 2017; Gauchat 2008; Roos 2014). Both textual literalists and atheists are more likely to see religion and science as being in inherent conflict, with each privileging a different institution in the perceived conflict (Baker 2012a, 2012b). As a result, the “science vs. religion” debate among the public has two distinct poles: religious fundamentalism and scientific atheism. In between

are a number of combinatorial positions where individuals accommodate religion and science into broader synthetic worldviews (Ecklund and Scheitle 2018).

In addition to these poles of the “science vs. religion” debate, scholars have also identified three groupings among the American public with regard to individuals’ orientations toward religion and science: “traditional” (religious individuals with low levels of social class and scientific knowledge); “modern” (secular and liberal religious individuals with high levels of social class and scientific knowledge); and “post-secular” (religious individuals opposed to evolution and the Big Bang—but not other parts of science—who are more likely to be white, upper class Protestants) (O’Brien and Noy 2015). These groupings are strongly connected to political views, with the “post-secular” group being the most politically conservative (Noy and O’Brien 2016) and most strongly opposed to abortion (O’Brien and Noy 2015). Importantly, these groupings are also closely connected to social location, particularly the intersection of race, ethnicity, social class, and gender (Noy and O’Brien 2018). But why are “post-secular” Americans high in both education level *and* the rejection of evolution and the Big Bang?

For those who see science as morally threatening, participating in theologically conservative communities (Baker 2013; Eckberg 1992; Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2008) with closed social networks (Hill 2014) moderates the effects of higher education on whether people oppose scientific claims. Importantly, Evans (2013, 2018) and others (Ecklund and Scheitle 2018; Ellison and Musick 1995) have demonstrated that these debates are primarily about visions of morality and the relative social status of one’s ideological group. In accordance with this, religiosity has been found to decrease confidence in institutional science, but not interest in or knowledge of science (Johnson et al. 2015). And in keeping with the assessment that disputes which are purportedly about science are primarily about morality and the demarcation of cultural

territory, research suggests that creationist movements have long been efforts to shore up particular *moral positions* rather than formally challenging evolutionary theory on scientific grounds (see Alumkal 2017; Toumey 1994).

This “culture war” dimension is also why debates about “science and religion” are intensely political, often playing out as conflicts over localized institutions, especially public education (Berkman and Plutzer 2005, 2009, 2010; Binder 2002). Empirical research has documented an increasing politicization of views about science among the American public since the 1970s (Gauchat 2012), showing that “the culture divisions over science's authority have coalesced with political identities rather than cross-cutting them” (Gouchat 2015: 740). Indeed, within some religious communities, such the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, members’ political views effectively determine their attitudes regarding controversial scientific issues such as evolution (Baker et al. 2018).

Focusing on the politicization of both religion and views of science helps us understand some of the debates over science and religion among the American public, but current research also leaves an important part of this story unexamined: *How* have religion and science views becoming politicized? More directly, knowing that partisanship is related to Americans’ views of science and scientists is important, but what are the ideological and cultural mechanisms linking political positioning to these views? Similarly, identifying textual literalism or participation in theologically conservative communities as connected to views of science raises the question of how particular theological positions get translated into larger religio-political and cultural frameworks within which people feel threatened by certain aspects of science or professional scientists as a group. In the U.S., there is a prevalent cultural framework that makes these links explicit in both its rhetoric and practice: Christian nationalism.



## **Christian Nationalism and Perceptions of Science as a Moral and Cultural Threat**

Distinct from what scholars have described as “American civil religion,” which historically integrated civic Republicanism with prophetic Old Testament injunctions to ensure societal justice and equality (Bellah 1967; Gorski 2017a), Christian nationalism draws on different parts of the Bible, integrating Old Testament demands for ethno-cultural purity and military conquest with Christian triumphalism (Gorski 2017b). Combining these and other symbols, myths, traditions, and narratives, Christian nationalism is a cultural framework that insists upon a fusion of American civic life and a particular vision of Christianity—one that contains hierarchical assumptions about race, gender, nationality, and sexuality. It demands that the United States be “Christian” in its national identity, historical narratives, sacred symbols, and public policies (Whitehead and Perry 2020).

Though it is ostensibly connected to moral interests (e.g., regarding sexual orientation, gender identity, and abortion), research has shown that these concerns stem primarily from a more fundamental interest in a traditional, hierarchical order with distinct cultural boundaries separating insiders (traditionally people who are white, native-born, patriarchal, Protestants) from outsiders (people who are non-white, foreign-born, non-traditional, and/or from minority religious groups) (Whitehead and Perry 2020). For instance, Christian nationalism is tightly linked to attitudes about racial boundaries (Davis and Perry 2020; Edgell and Tranby 2010; Perry and Whitehead 2015a, 2015b), racially-coded government spending (Davis 2019), police mistreatment of blacks (Perry et al. 2019), restricting immigration (McDaniel et al. 2011; Sherkat and Lehman 2018), and antipathy toward religious “others” (Merino 2010; Sherkat and Lehman 2018; Shortle and Gaddie 2015; Stewart et al. 2018).

Because of its commitment to a mythic narrative of Christianity’s ideological dominance

in the U.S., an important part of Christian nationalism’s political project within the past few decades has been the preservation and domination of Christianity’s moral authority in American culture (Hummel 2016). Illustrating how vital such authority is for Christian nationalism, data from the 2014 General Social Survey shows that 82% of Americans who think being a Christian is “very important” to being American also say they disapprove of the Supreme Court ruling that no state or local government may require the reading of the Lord’s Prayer or Bible verses in public schools. Stated positively, over four out of five people who subscribe to Christian nationalist views believe local governments should have the authority to compel all children to read the Bible or participate in Christian prayers at public schools.

Because it provides an alternative source of moral authority beyond divine revelation, and consequently, different narratives regarding human origins, social organization, and humanity’s relationship to nature, institutional science is perceived as a threat to the supremacy of Christianity as *the* moral authority in the public sphere. Prominent adherents of Christian nationalism often express this perceived threat from science in explicitly moral terms, warning of the degradation of proper social relationships and the decay of civic values. Franklin Graham (son of “America’s pastor” Billy Graham) and Robert Jeffress (senior pastor of the 10,000-member First Baptist Church in Dallas)—two noted proponents of Christian nationalism—routinely excoriate “seculars and humanists” for their insistence on privileging evolution in educational settings. In his book *Twilight’s Last Gleaming*, Jeffress (2016: 98) connects the scientific community’s intolerance for biblical creationism as an indicator of “a tide of evil that is about to destroy our country.” Similarly, in his book *A Time for Action: Empowering the Faithful to Reclaim America*, fundamentalist minister Rafael Cruz (2016: 167–168), father of Texas senator Ted Cruz, writes:

Fifty-eight million abortions since 1973. School shootings. Inner city violence. The problem with violence in our country isn't the result of the proliferation of guns. The problem is how little we value human life.... Since evolutionary theory tells us we're nothing more than animals, why should we be surprised when we act like them?

Elsewhere Cruz (2016: 134) attributes indicators of moral decline to the removal of prayer and Bible reading from public schools.

The reasoning of Christian nationalists like Cruz, Graham, and Jeffress is indicative of their perception of a zero-sum conflict over moral and cultural authority in American civil society. To the extent that scientific thinking replaces a conservative Christian worldview, Americans jeopardize the proper social order and therefore threaten to plunge society into chaos. Building on this argument, we anticipate that Americans who subscribe to Christian nationalism will express greater skepticism towards scientific authority, particularly if it is juxtaposed with religion as a competing source of authority.

Additionally, because Christian nationalism is, among other things, fundamentally “politicized religion,” we hypothesize that Christian nationalism can help explain why the “science vs. religion” debate is so deeply partisan. Christian nationalism has become a powerful predictor of supporting conservative policies and political candidates (Bean 2014; Whitehead et al. 2018a; Whitehead et al. 2018b). This is in large part due to the Republican Party platform becoming synonymous with “restoring” the sacred values, moral superiority, unity, pride, and prosperity of America’s mythic past (Whitehead and Perry 2020). Conversely, growing partisan polarization has led the Democratic Party to embrace progress in all its forms and reject Christian nationalist tropes romanticizing America’s religious, moral heritage (Braunstein 2018).

Consequently, we expect that much of the observed associations between partisanship and moral concerns about science are the result of partisan differences in Christian nationalism.

John Evans' (2018) wide-ranging study of the conflicts between science and religion among the American public provides a theoretical framework for understanding attitudes toward both science and scientists, as well as why Christian nationalism may play a key role in these issues. Evans (2011, 2018) shows that conservative Protestants have only what he terms "propositional conflicts" with science, meaning that while there are select issues that evangelicals oppose—such as evolution, the Big Bang, and stem cell research—on other issues there are *not* differences between conservative Protestants and other Americans in orientations toward science. Evans argues that this selective opposition to particular aspects of science results from perceived moral threat and "status politics" (also see Guhin 2016). Accordingly:

It is then not so much that [conservative Protestants] want to show that Darwin was factually wrong so much as they want to show the importance of the creationist idea that has become symbolic of their religious group. If they can get the public schools to give equal time to creationism, they establish that their religious group still has status in society (Evans 2018: 135).

Although Evans' research establishes the nature of the perceived conflicts between religion and science among conservative Protestants, and his theory points to status politics as the most likely mechanism, he nonetheless concludes that: "It is difficult to test these possible reasons as data are not available" (Evans 2018: 135).

Building on and extending Evans' (2018) theory, as well previous empirical research, we hypothesize that it is Christian nationalism and the desire to see Christianity's status elevated in the public sphere that is primarily responsible for the greater likelihood of religious Americans'

opposition to select aspects of science, as well as moral concerns about professional scientists. To evaluate whether this is the case, we examine two testable hypotheses about possible connections between Christian nationalism and views of science among the American public. First, we hypothesize that Christian nationalism will be the strongest predictor of opposition to scientific authority, even when controlling for factors found to be important in previous research, such as frequency of religious practice (Evans 2013), religious affiliation (Evans 2018), biblical literalism (Baker 2013; Ellison and Musick 1995), and political views (Gauchat 2012). Similarly, we expect Christian nationalism to be significantly and strongly related to the rejection of evolution, as well as support for teaching creationism, as these issues are framed primarily as matters of moral authority (see Trolinger and Trolinger 2016).

Likewise, because Christian nationalism supplies much of the logic and language of political conservatives regarding moral authority and social status concerns (Delehanty et al. 2019; Whitehead and Perry 2020; Whitehead et al. 2018a), we hypothesize that a substantial portion of the covariance between individuals' religious and political characteristics with their attitudes toward science and scientists will be explained through differential levels of Christian nationalism. In other words, we examine whether significant portions of the correlations between religiosity and political conservatism with opposition to scientific authority are actually the result of such characteristics' connections to higher average levels of Christian nationalism. To test this hypothesis that Christian nationalism is a central mechanism linking politics and religion to views of science, we use mediation models to estimate the indirect effects of religious and political characteristics through Christian nationalist ideology for predicting attitudes about scientific authority, as well as views about evolution and creationism.

## **DATA AND METHODS**

To examine the relationship between Christian nationalism and opposition to scientific authority, as well as stances toward evolution and creationism, we use the 2007 Baylor Religion Survey (BRS), which was designed to carefully examine Americans' religious beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes. Survey data were collected by Gallup, with a final sample size of 1,648 cases. The 2007 BRS is a national, random sample of American adults. Using random-digit dialing, a total of 3,500 potential respondents were contacted, with 2,460 questionnaires ultimately being mailed out. With 1,648 questionnaires mailed back, the contact-to-completion rate was 47.1% (1,648/3,500). The 2007 BRS compares favorably to other national surveys taken at the same time, such as the 2008 General Social Survey (Froese and Bader 2010). While it is now over a decade old, the 2007 BRS is still the ideal (and only) data source for testing our hypotheses, as no other national surveys of American adults contain multi-item measures of both Christian nationalism and science attitudes, along with measures for political ideology, a broad range of religious characteristics, and important sociodemographic controls.

### ***Dependent Variables***

We examine five dependent variables using responses to a battery questions concerning Americans' attitudes toward science and religion. Each question asks respondents to "Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements about science." The items we analyze here are: "We rely too much on science and not enough on faith"; "Most scientists are hostile to religion"; "Creationism should be taught in public schools"; "Science will eventually provide solutions to most of our problems"; and "Humans evolved from other primates over millions of years." Possible response options ranged from "strongly disagree" (0) to "strongly agree" (4), with "undecided" (2) as the middle category. For the first three questions we dichotomized responses such that "strongly agree" and "agree" = 1, and all other responses = 0.

For the last two questions “strongly disagree” and “disagree” = 1, with all other responses = 0. We maintain the full ordinal coding of the original measures for the indirect PROCESS models described in the analysis section.<sup>7</sup> Each of these measures is significantly correlated with Christian nationalism (see Table I).

The first three of the dependent variables tap into perceived moral dimensions of science. In particular the “we rely too much on science” and “scientists are hostile to faith” items assess the degree to which respondents perceive a tension between science and religion. The teaching creationism item is technically a policy question, but it also assesses the degree to which Americans want to see a particular religious perspective—fundamentalist Christianity—privileged in the public sphere. The item about whether science will solve future problems captures respondents’ “faith” in science, and importantly does not mention religion at all. Consequently, this item is more of an indicator of whether people are hopeful about the application of science to addressing social problems. Finally, the acceptance of evolution item is a factual question; but at the same time, the controversial status of evolution in many conservative Christian traditions mean that this item measures both factual knowledge about science as well as the extent to which respondents oppose evolution on religious grounds (or not). In all, the first three items clearly tap Evans’ (2018) moral dimension of science opposition, while the fourth item examines optimism about science, and the fifth is primarily a factual question, albeit one that has come to attain a moral dimension in particular religious subcultures.

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<sup>7</sup> In ancillary models we combined these five measures into an “opposition to the authority of science” index (see Table AI). Christian nationalism was strongly and positively associated with the index ( $r = .75$ ;  $p < .001$ ), and was the strongest predictor in the full model.

We hypothesized that Christian nationalism would be most strongly related to the three outcomes directly invoking a competition between the moral authority of science and religion.

### ***Independent Variable***

Our independent variable of interest is a Christian nationalism index composed of six different items. The first set of five questions asked respondents, “To what extent do you agree or disagree,” followed by a series of different questions: “That the federal government should declare the United States a Christian nation?” (27% agree); “That the federal government should advocate Christian values?” (55% agree); “That the federal government should allow the display of religious symbols in public spaces?” (68% agree); “That the federal government should allow prayer in public schools?” (69% agree); and “That the federal government should enforce a strict separation of church and state?” (38% *disagree*). The final measure asks respondents to “Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements about world events: “The success of the United States is part of God's plan” (31% agree). Possible response options for all six items ranged from “strongly disagree” (0) to “strongly agree” (4), with “undecided” (2) coded as the middle category. The question on enforcing separation of church and state was reverse coded to match the direction of the other five questions. Higher scores on this index correspond to stronger adherence to Christian nationalist ideology. The index has high reliability, with a Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .87$ . This index has also shown high reliability across different samples (*cf.* Perry et al. 2019; Whitehead and Perry 2015).

### ***Control Variables***

Our analysis controls for a collection of measures shown to affect science attitudes in prior studies (see Baker 2013; Evans 2011, 2018; Ellison and Musick 1995; Guachat 2008; Noy and O’Brien 2016). Political identity is a seven-point scale ranging from “extremely



conservative” (1) to “extremely liberal” (7). Religious practice is a standardized and centered index of respondents’ frequency of attendance at religious services, frequency of prayer outside of religious services, and frequency of reading sacred scriptures outside of religious services (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .82$ ). Biblical literalism is a four-point ordinal measure with higher scores corresponding to viewing the Bible more “literally.” In order to account for religious affiliation, we placed each respondent into one of seven categories: evangelical Protestant, mainline Protestant, black Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, other religions, or no religion (Steensland et al. 2000). The 2007 BRS used a very thorough strategy of measuring and coding respondents into traditions that combined information from responses to a general affiliation question that had forty specific options and write-in choice, a separate question about denomination, and a separate question about the respondent’s specific congregation, if applicable (see Dougherty, Johnson, and Polson 2007). Evangelical Protestants serve as our contrast category.<sup>8</sup>

Our socio-demographic control variables include gender (woman = 1), age (in years), race (white as contrast category, African American = 1, other races = 1), size of place (ranging from rural = 1 to large city = 4), education (ranging from 8<sup>th</sup> grade or less = 1 to postgraduate work/degree = 7), income (ranging from \$10,000 or less = 1 to \$150,001 or more = 7), and region of the country (South = 1).

### *Analyses*

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<sup>8</sup> In ancillary analyses we included indices for both active and angry images of God (Froese and Bader 2010) as additional religious control measures, but the results did not differ substantially from those presented. The results presented also remain the same in models including a separate control for self-identification as a religious “fundamentalist.”

We begin with a brief overview of descriptive statistics for our variables and their respective bivariate correlations with Christian nationalism, which are presented in Table I. We then move to binary logistic regression models in Table II, where we show the associations between Christian nationalism and each specific view of science outcome after controlling for possible confounding variables. We present standardized coefficients for all significant covariates. In order to examine the substantive strength of the relationship between Christian nationalism and each outcome, we graph the predicted probabilities of holding each view across varying levels of Christian nationalism in Figure I. All covariates were mean centered.

We then examine the interplay between Christian nationalism and other measures of politics and religion for predicting each of the science attitude outcomes by using PROCESS mediation models (Hayes 2013; Preacher and Hayes 2004, 2008), which are a form of path modeling grounded in regression analyses (see Darlington and Hayes 2017: 447–477). PROCESS uses bootstrapping procedures to produce more accurate and bias-corrected estimates of indirect effects (MacKinnon et al. 2002). We use these models to identify the degree to which correlations between political and religious characteristics with opposition to scientific authority are indirect by virtue of their respective influences on levels of Christian nationalism.

In all of the multivariate and PROCESS models, we use multiple imputation (MI) techniques to correct for missing data (Rubin 1996).<sup>9</sup> In the results section we periodically report

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<sup>9</sup> The MI procedure in SAS 9.3 generates five imputed datasets using multiple Markov Chains based on all of the variables included in the models, which results in an overall *N* of 8,240 (1,648 x 5). The results in Table II use the MI ANALYZE procedure in SAS, which combines the results from the five imputations to generate overall estimates, standard errors, and significance

standardized coefficients for the binary logistic regression models. For the mediation models, the independent variables of interest for religion and politics were standardized by their respective means and standard deviations before modeling, making the resulting coefficients more comparable in scale.

## RESULTS

Table I displays descriptive statistics for each of the measures, along with their respective correlations with Christian nationalism. Thirty-eight percent of Americans in 2007 agreed that “we rely too much on science and not enough on faith.” Just under half (46%) thought science would not provide answers to future problems. Forty-four percent supported teaching creationism in public schools, while 42% disagreed that humans evolved from other primates. A quarter of Americans (24%) said that most scientists are hostile to religion. The Christian nationalism index ranges from zero to 24, with a mean of 12.33; it is strongly and positively correlated with agreeing that “we rely too much on science and not enough on faith” ( $r = .56$ ;  $p < .001$ ), agreeing that most scientists are hostile to religion ( $r = .32$ ;  $p < .001$ ), supporting teaching creationism in public schools ( $r = .42$ ;  $p < .001$ ), believing science will not provide answers to future problems ( $r = .32$ ;  $p < .001$ ), and rejecting evolution ( $r = .54$ ;  $p < .001$ ).

[Insert Table I about here]

Table II shows the results of the five binary logistic regression models predicting the various views of science. Model 1 examines agreement that “we rely too much on science and not enough on faith.” Christian nationalism is significantly and positively associated with this

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tests. The PROCESS mediation models used pooled data from the five imputed datasets.

Analyses using listwise deletion of missing data showed results that mirror those presented.

outcome and the standardized coefficient is the largest in the model ( $\beta = .69$ ;  $p < .001$ ). The solid black line in Figure I depicts the strong influence of increasing levels of Christian nationalism on the probability that someone thinks “we rely too much on science and not enough on faith.”

Notably, political liberalism is unrelated to this outcome after controlling for Christian nationalism, but increasing religious practice ( $\beta = .28$ ;  $p < .001$ ) and biblical literalism ( $\beta = .29$ ;  $p < .001$ ) remain significantly and positively associated.<sup>10</sup>

Model 2 predicts agreement that “most scientists are hostile to religion.” Christian nationalism ( $\beta = .28$ ;  $p < .001$ ) is significantly, strongly, and positively associated with this view and has the strongest association in the model. The probability of holding this view at the lowest level of Christian nationalism is quite low (.08), while at the highest level of Christian nationalism the probability of having a negative moral valuation of scientists more than quadruples (to .37). Political liberals ( $\beta = -.22$ ;  $p < .001$ ) were less likely to believe scientists are hostile to religion, as were mainline Protestants ( $\beta = -.12$ ;  $p < .01$ ), black Protestants ( $\beta = -.13$ ;  $p < .01$ ), Catholics ( $\beta = -.10$ ;  $p < .05$ ), and members of non-Judeo-Christian religions ( $\beta = -.10$ ;  $p < .05$ ) compared to evangelicals. Biblical literalists ( $\beta = .12$ ;  $p < .05$ ) were more likely to agree that scientists are hostile to religion.

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<sup>10</sup> Catholics and the religious nones were more likely than evangelicals to affirm that “we rely too much on science” in Model 1. This is a suppressor effect after controlling for views of the Bible and religiosity. Before these controls are added both groups are significantly *less* likely than evangelicals to affirm the outcome. Jewish respondents were also less likely to agree that “we rely too much on science” and that “scientists are hostile to faith,” but there were not enough ( $n = 29$ ) in the survey to generate reliable estimates.

In Model 3 predicting support for teaching creationism in public schools, Christian nationalism ( $\beta = .33$ ;  $p < .001$ ) is significantly and positively associated with this outcome, and is once again the strongest predictor in the model. At the lowest level of Christian nationalism there is a relatively low predicted probability (.20) of supporting teaching creationism, while over two thirds (.68) of people at the highest level of Christian nationalism support teaching creationism in public schools. Political liberals ( $\beta = -.13$ ;  $p < .01$ ) are less likely to support teaching creationism, while the religiously active ( $\beta = .13$ ;  $p < .01$ ) and biblical literalists ( $\beta = .09$ ;  $p < .05$ ) are significantly more likely to support this view. Mainline Protestants ( $\beta = -.13$ ;  $p < .001$ ), Catholics ( $\beta = -.12$ ;  $p < .01$ ), and the nonaffiliated ( $\beta = -.12$ ;  $p < .05$ ) were significantly less likely to support teaching creationism than evangelicals.

Model 4 examines believing that science will not “eventually provide the solutions to most of our problems.” Here, we see that Christian nationalism is *not* significantly associated with the dependent variable, net of controls. Political liberalism ( $\beta = -.18$ ;  $p < .001$ ) is strongly and negatively associated with this attitude. Mainline Protestants ( $\beta = -.10$ ;  $p < .001$ ), Catholics ( $\beta = -.12$ ;  $p < .001$ ), and the nonaffiliated ( $\beta = -.10$ ;  $p < .001$ ) are each less likely than evangelicals to hold this view. Religious practice ( $\beta = .25$ ;  $p < .001$ ) is significantly and positively associated with pessimism about science, and was the largest predictor in the model. Looking at the results from Table III on the indirect effects of religious practice on this outcome, only 8% of the total effect of religiosity on pessimism about science is mediated through Christian nationalism. This suggests that Christian nationalism is primarily invoked in situations of competition for authority rather than overall pessimism about science, and also that religiosity seems to have a direct relationship with pessimism about using science to solve human problems.

Model 5 of Table II predicts rejecting evolution. Similar to the first three models,

Christian nationalism ( $\beta = .35$ ;  $p < .001$ ) is significantly and positively associated with rejecting evolution, and is the second strongest effect in the model behind religious practice ( $\beta = .41$ ;  $p < .001$ ). The predicted probability of rejecting human evolution for those at the lowest level of Christian nationalism is quite low (.13). The probability of rejecting evolution quadruples (to .62) at the highest level of Christian nationalism.<sup>11</sup> Political liberals ( $\beta = -.21$ ;  $p < .001$ ) were less likely to reject evolution. Biblical literalists ( $\beta = .33$ ;  $p < .001$ ) were more likely to reject evolutionary accounts of human origins. Compared to evangelicals, mainline Protestants ( $\beta = -.18$ ;  $p < .001$ ) and Catholics ( $\beta = -.25$ ;  $p < .001$ ) are less likely to reject evolution.

[Insert Table II about here]

[Insert Figure I about here]

Table III shows results from the PROCESS mediation models estimating the indirect effects of political ideology, religious practice, and views of the Bible through Christian nationalism for predicting the five attitudes toward science. The strongest indirect effect for political ideology through Christian nationalism occurs for the “we rely too much on science and not enough on faith” outcome. The direct effects of political liberalism on this outcome are small and *positive* ( $b = .039$ ;  $p < .01$ ), while the indirect effects through Christian nationalism are substantial and negative ( $b = -.170$ ;  $p < .001$ ). Thus, the overall negative relationship between political liberalism and thinking “we rely too much on science” is wholly explained by the positive correlation between political conservatism and Christian nationalism. In other words, the politicization of the moral devaluing of science relative to religion *is entirely because of the*

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<sup>11</sup> We also tested interaction terms for Christian nationalism and the race categories for the five outcomes, but all results were non-significant.

*alignment between political conservatism and Christian nationalism.* There were also significant indirect effects for religiosity ( $b = .414$ ;  $p < .001$ ) and Bible views ( $b = .393$ ;  $p < .001$ ) through Christian nationalism for agreeing that “we rely too much on science and not enough on faith.”

[Insert Table III about here]

A considerable amount (38%) of the overall effect of political views on perceiving a moral threat from professional scientists (“scientists are hostile to faith”) is also indirect, channeled through Christian nationalism. For this outcome there were also significant and substantial indirect effects for religious practice and Bible views through Christian nationalism. The largest indirect effects for both of these predictors through Christian nationalism were for agreeing that “scientists are hostile to faith.” Religiosity had a non-significant direct effect ( $b = .017$ ;  $p = .26$ ), but a significant indirect effect ( $b = .057$ ;  $p < .001$ ) that accounted for the majority (77%) of the overall effect. Similarly, the majority (57%) of the overall effect of Bible views on the perception of moral threat from scientists was mediated through Christian nationalism. These findings show that overall, Christian nationalism is the primary conduit through which religion leads to a negative moral valuation of professional scientists.

Christian nationalism also helps explain substantial proportions of the correlations between political views and rejecting human evolution and support for teaching creationism in public schools. Forty-nine percent of the politicization of support for teaching creationism in public schools is attributable to Christian nationalism. Similarly, 45% of the overall effect of political ideology on rejecting evolution is indirect through Christian nationalism. Fifty-nine percent of the overall effect of Bible views on support for teaching creationism was mediated by Christian nationalism, as was 47% of the overall effect of religiosity on this outcome. Although smaller as a proportion of the total effects, around one-fourth of the effects of Bible views (29%)

and religiosity (23%) on accepting or rejecting evolution are mediated through Christian nationalism.

It is critical to note that the indirect effects for religiosity and Bible views through Christian nationalism were the largest, both in terms of size and proportion of overall effects, for the two outcomes pitting the moral authority of science *against* that of religion. The third strongest effects were for supporting the teaching of creationism in public schools, a position that is similarly framed as a matter of the cultural, public legitimation of conservative Christian moral authority. In contrast, the indirect effects for these religious predictors through Christian nationalism were weaker for the factual outcome (acceptance of evolution), and especially small for beliefs about whether science will solve future problems, a question which notably does not invoke an issue of competition for moral authority directly or even indirectly (as in the case of evolution acceptance). This pattern of results supports Evans' (2018) theory that the "science vs. religion" narrative is propositional and primarily a conflict over moral authority.<sup>12</sup> The strength of Christian nationalism for predicting rejection of evolution, which is ostensibly just a question about an established scientific fact, shows that evolution is perceived by Christian nationalists as a moral threat. In effect, rejecting evolution—and wanting others to do so too by imposing

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<sup>12</sup> We ran supplemental analyses on an outcome that asked for agreement with whether "science and religion are incompatible." This outcome has to be cross-classified with responses to the "we rely too much on science and not enough on faith" variable to be analyzed, as both secularists and religious fundamentalists are more likely to agree that science and religion are incompatible. Christian nationalism strongly and significantly predicted whether respondents agreed that religion and science were incompatible and wanted religion to be dominant.



creationism—reinforces Christian nationalists’ vision of America as officially Christian.

## DISCUSSION

These findings about Christian nationalism and opposition to science make contributions to theory and research on religion, politics, and public views of science. Christian nationalism is consistently a strong predictor of opposing scientific authority on controversial issues of science and religion, outpacing the effects other religious and political characteristics.<sup>13</sup> In addition to stances on disputes over moral and cultural authority, Americans’ views of evolution are also strongly connected to their desire to see Christianity privileged in the public sphere, above and beyond the influence of political ideology, religious affiliation, views of the Bible, or personal religious behaviors. Similar to previous studies of Christian nationalism on a range of different outcomes, merely accounting for personal religious piety ignores an important part of how religion is connected to views of science.

Our findings support Evans’ (2018) theory that conflicts about “science and religion” are primarily issues about status politics, as significant proportions of the relationships between both political and religious characteristics with opposing scientific authority are because of their

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<sup>13</sup> Further, attitudes about Christian nationalism and opposition to the authority of science are so intertwined among the American public that analytical algorithms cannot distinguish between them. Table AI in the appendix shows the results of a factor analysis including all of the indicators used for both the Christian nationalism index and the views of science. Only one factor was extracted, and the measures make a more reliable index when they are *all combined together* (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .90$ ) than when the views of science (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .77$ ) or Christian nationalism indices (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .87$ ) are created separately.

shared covariance with Christian nationalist ideology. High religiosity, “literalist” Bible views, and political conservatism all exert significant and substantial indirect effects on negative moral valuations of science primarily because they correlate with increased average levels of Christian nationalism. Taken together, these findings demonstrate that Christian nationalism is a key cultural mechanism connecting religion, politics, and opposition to scientific authority among the American public. Future research on science attitudes and religion should consider the role of Christian nationalism in linking exclusivist religion with political projects seeking to (re)establish Christianity as the dominant moral and cultural order.

While these findings advance our understanding of how religion, politics, and views of science intersect among the American public, there are also important limitations to our study. The most prominent limitation is the use of older, cross-sectional data. Prior research also demonstrates that Christian nationalism can increase and recede across the population in response to period effects (Whitehead and Scheitle 2018). Comparing the means and standard deviations of the Christian nationalism index using the 2007 wave of the Baylor Religion Survey (mean = 17.98, SD = 6.41) and the 2017 wave of the Baylor Religion Survey (mean = 17.56, SD = 6.42) shows these views fluctuated little over that decade (*cf.* Perry et al. 2019; Whitehead and Perry 2015); however, given the ubiquity of Christian nationalist rhetoric in contemporary public and political discourse, it could be that the dynamics of support for and opposition to Christian nationalism are changing. In particular, Donald Trump’s highly visible use to Christian nationalism likely portends deepening political polarization over issues of Christianity in the public sphere (Whitehead et al. 2018a).

Another limitation of our study is that longitudinal data are necessary to help disentangle issues of causality. While we think that the directional model we proceed from (Christian

nationalism strongly contributing to opposing the authority of science) makes more intuitive sense than the alternative, the BRS data do not allow us to partition the causal direction of the relationship between Christian nationalism and views of science. In addition to the need for panel data, looking at issues of Christian nationalism in other countries in relation to science attitudes would improve the current findings by situating these results in a comparative context, an important next step that is already being undertaken in the wider field of science and religion studies (Catto et al. 2019). Returning to the comparative perspective we began the study with, we suspect that American citizens may be different than those in other Western and post-industrial countries, but the degree to which this is the case awaits applicable data.

Christian nationalism is many things, but above all it is an effort to (re)assert the dominant moral and cultural authority of a white, native-born, straight, masculine, and Christian social order. Likewise, disputes about “science and religion” are primarily conflicts over moral and cultural order. Our study shows that many of the boundary conflicts between science and religion in the U.S. are part of a broader effort to establish conservative Christianity as the official religious and social order of American society. In this sense, these conflicts are less about science *per se*, and more about status politics and attempting to assert social dominance.

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## **APPENDIX**

[Insert Table AI about here]

**Table AI.** Factor and Reliability Analyses for Science and Christian Nationalism Measures

<b>Survey Item</b>	<b>Factor Loading</b>
<b>Scientific authority measures</b>	
Rely too much on science not enough on faith	.735
Most scientists are hostile to religion	.451
Support teaching creationism in public schools	.611
Science will eventually provide answers	-.453
Accept evolutionary origins of humans	-.724
<b>Christian nationalism measures</b>	
Gov. should declare U.S. a Christian nation	.716
Gov. should advocate Christian values	.788
Gov. should enforce separation of church/state	-.555
Gov. should allow prayer in schools	.826
Gov. should allow display of religious symbols	.741
Success of U.S. part of God's plan	.726
<b>Reliability statistics</b>	
	<b>Cronbach's <math>\alpha</math></b>
Moral concern about science index	.769
Christian nationalism index	.872
Combined index	.900

Source: 2007 Baylor Religion Survey (MI data)

Maximum likelihood extraction (Promax rotation [no rotation occurred, only one factor extracted])

**Table I.** Descriptive Statistics

	Mean or %	S.D.	Min	Max	Christian Nationalism (r)
<b><u>Dependent variables</u></b>					
Rely too much on science	38.3	---	0	1	.56***
Scientists hostile to faith	24.1	---	0	1	.32***
Teach creationism in schools	44.0	---	0	1	.42***
Science won't provide answers	46.4	---	0	1	.33***
Reject human evolution	42.4	---	0	1	.54***
<b><u>Independent variables</u></b>					
Christian nationalism	12.33	6.46	0	24	---
<b>Politics</b>					
Political liberalism	3.62	1.62	1	7	-.56***
<b>Religion</b>					
Religious practice	.00	2.50	-5.35	3.20	.61***
Biblical literalism	2.59	1.11	1	4	.68***
Evangelical Protestant	33.1	---	0	1	.38***
Mainline Protestant	20.7	---	0	1	-.01
Black Protestant	4.8	---	0	1	.13**
Catholic	22.1	---	0	1	.00
Jewish	1.9	---	0	1	-.19***
Other religion	5.8	---	0	1	-.09***
No religion	11.6	---	0	1	-.48***
<b>Demographics</b>					
Female	53.0	---	0	1	.11***
Age	47.35	16.82	18	96	.07**
African American	8.1	---	0	1	.12***
Other race	7.2	---	0	1	-.01
Size of place	2.66	.95	1	4	.20***
Education	4.29	1.53	1	7	-.25***
Income	4.31	1.59	1	7	-.19***
South	32.4	---	0	1	.19***

Source: 2007 Baylor Religion Survey (MI data)

**Table II.** Binary Logistic Regression Models Predicting Science Attitudes by Christian Nationalism, Politics, Religion, and Sociodemographics

	Rely Too Much on Science		Scientists Hostile to Faith		Teach Creationism in Public Schools		Science Will Not Provide Answers		Reject Evolution	
	b	$\beta$	b	$\beta$	b	$\beta$	b	$\beta$	b	$\beta$
Christian nationalism	.19***	.69	.08***	.28	.09***	.33	.02	---	.10***	.35
<b>Politics</b>										
Political liberalism	.03	---	-.25***	-.22	-.14**	-.13	-.20***	-.18	-.24***	-.21
<b>Religion</b>										
Religious practice	.20***	.28	.05	---	.09**	.13	.17***	.25	.29***	.41
Biblical literalism	.50***	.29	.20*	.12	.15*	.09	.14 <sup>†</sup>	.08	.57***	.33
Mainline Protestant	.14	---	-.54**	-.12	-.59***	-.13	-.46**	-.10	-.83***	-.18
Black Protestant	-.44	---	-1.11**	-.13	-.26	---	-.25	---	.36	---
Catholic	.49*	.11	-.43*	-.10	-.51**	-.12	-.54***	-.12	-1.12***	-.25
Jewish	-4.12	---	-1.03	---	-.54	---	-.12	---	-9.12	---
Other religion	.33	---	-.77*	-.10	-.32	---	-.23	---	-.11	---
No religion	.84*	.15	.53 <sup>†</sup>	.09	-.67*	-.12	-.59*	-.10	-.14	---
<b>Demographics</b>										
Female	-.04	---	-.10	---	-.19	---	.24*	.07	-.08	---
Age	.00	---	-.01**	-.12	.00	---	.00	---	.00	---
African American	.68 <sup>†</sup>	.10	1.34***	.20	-.10	---	-.10	---	-.87*	-.13
Other race	-.43	---	-.36	---	.08	---	.17	---	-.22	---
Size of place	.04	---	-.07	---	.10	---	.00	---	.21**	.11
Education	.00	---	.02	---	.06	---	.09*	.08	-.07	---
Income	-.23***	-.20	-.11*	-.09	.12**	.10	-.03	---	.10 <sup>†</sup>	.09
South	.14	---	.08	---	-.01	---	.08	---	-.15	---
<b>Model stats</b>										
Intercept	-3.41***		-2.39***		-1.46***		-.042*		-1.89***	
N	1,648		1,648		1,648		1,648		1,648	
PRE	.347		.163		.178		.143		.385	

Source: 2007 Baylor Religion Survey (MI Data)

<sup>†</sup>p<.10; \*p<.05; \*\*p<.01; \*\*\*p<.001; b = unstandardized coefficients;  $\beta$  = standardized coefficients

Reference categories are evangelicals and whites. Control variables are mean centered. PRE = proportional reduction in error.

**Table III.** Direct and Indirect Effects of Politics and Religion on Opposition to Scientific Authority Mediated by Christian Nationalism (unstandardized coefficients)

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Rely Too Much on Science</b>	<b>Scientists Hostile to Faith</b>	<b>Teach Creationism in Schools</b>	<b>Science Will Not Provide Answers</b>	<b>Reject Human Evolution</b>
<b><u>Politics</u></b>					
<b><u>Political liberalism</u></b>					
Direct effect	.039**	-.117***	-.157***	-.106***	-.153***
Indirect effect	-.170***	-.073***	-.153***	-.033***	-.125***
Total effect	-.131	-.190	-.310	-.139	-.278
% mediated by CN	130%	38%	49%	24%	45%
<b><u>Religion</u></b>					
<b><u>Religious practice</u></b>					
Direct effect	.258***	.017	.138***	.294***	.342***
Indirect effect	.135***	.057***	.122***	.027***	.100***
Total effect	.393	.074	.260	.321	.442
% mediated by CN	34%	77%	47%	8%	23%
<b><u>Biblical literalism</u></b>					
Direct effect	.252***	.052*	.101***	.124***	.291***
Indirect effect	.162***	.070***	.145***	.032***	.118***
Total effect	.414	.122	.246	.156	.409
% mediated by CN	39%	57%	59%	21%	29%

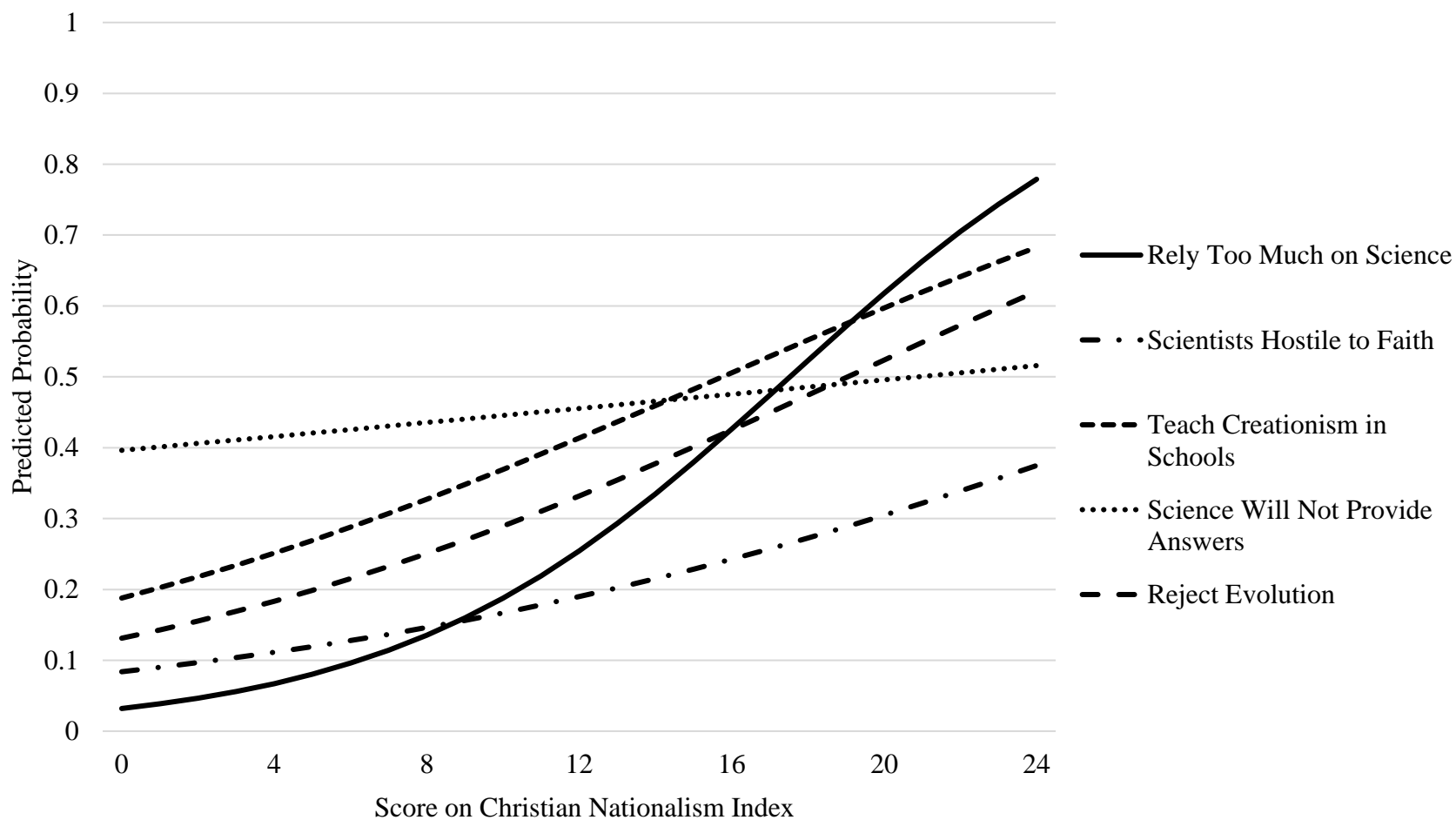
Source: 2007 Baylor Religion Survey (MI Data)

PROCESS mediation models (1,000 bootstrapped samples)

Note: Variables were standardized by respective means and standard deviations before entry

\*p < .05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\*p < .001 (two-tailed tests)

**Figure I.** Opposition to Scientific Authority by Christian Nationalism



Source: 2007 Baylor Religion Survey (MI data)