

How the conservative right hijacks religion

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Democrats are beginning to [challenge the Republican grip on the language of religion and faith](#) in the United States. Democrat Sen. Chris Coons, a graduate of Yale Divinity School, recently wrote an essay for *The Atlantic*, “[Democrats Need to Talk About Their Faith](#).”

This is a bold and necessary move. However, it may come up against scientific and progressive resistance. This resistance is based on the claim that [science and religion](#), or religion and [progressive politics](#), are incompatible.

Scorn for religion can be seen both among some learned atheists or in popular culture. Oxford evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins [dismissively discusses](#) religion in *The God Delusion*; comedian, political commentator and talk show host Bill Maher’s [documentary *Religulous*](#) also [took a smug and barbed approach](#) and has faced criticisms of [liberal Islamophobia](#).

Arguments voiced by such figures often argue that science is empirical while religion is based on authority, is reactionary and expects you to believe things based on faith, dogma or charismatic authority.

True, some of the faithful eschew empirical reality in favour of blind faith.

But not all [scientists reject faith](#) and traditional forms of religion. And not all religion is about blind faith and authority, nor is all human spirituality beyond empirical investigation.

Science and human spirituality are not incompatible. Scientists can, and sometimes do, think about and explore human spirituality in a philosophical and [empirical manner](#).

Spiritual closet

If some scientists seems to accept a relationship between science and human spirituality, they may still be [unwilling to discuss it openly](#). They are, so to speak, in [the spiritual closet](#).

One study of scientists in U.S. universities found that although only a small subset was religious in a traditional sense, [many consider themselves spiritual](#) in some way. Their sense of spirituality was congruent with their views about science.

Some psychologists have sought to explore spirituality through empirical investigation. The observable aspect of human spirituality goes by different names. To some, like [William James, pioneer of modern psychology and author of the 1880 *Principles of Psychology*](#), it is “[mystical experience](#).” To [Abraham Maslow](#), founder of both the humanistic and existential schools of psychology, it is “[peak experience](#).” Addictions specialist and community worker [William White](#) calls it “[transformational experience](#).” In my research in the area of the sociology of religion and mystical experience, I call it, for agnostic simplicity, [connection experience](#).

‘Connection’ experiences can help heal

Psychologists who have studied connection experience agree it is an observable and consequential thing.

White reviews historical accounts to relay how [transformational change](#) — a “process of psychological death and rebirth” — can lead to recovery from alcoholism.

William R. Miller, clinical psychologist and emeritus professor of psychology and psychiatry at University of New Mexico, has researched what he calls “quantum change” — “[sudden, dramatic, and enduring transformations that affect a broad range of personal emotion, cognition and behaviour](#).”

Big deal if some people have mystical experiences. Why is this relevant?

Conservatives hijack the religious agenda

Connection experiences are important for many reasons, but one in particular stands out.

The political colonization and exploitation of human spirituality is a strategy of conservative elites.

Christina Forrester, founder and director of Christian Democrats of America, notes that in the 1980s, political conservatives [used people's authentic spiritual sentiment to create a moral majority of spiritual zealots](#) organized around an opposition to abortion that did not exist in the same way before.

When Donald Trump was campaigning for president, he claimed he loved the Bible but then [refused to elaborate when asked about his favourite verses](#). His supposed love for the Bible may have helped him [fool the masses](#) and get him elected. Similarly, U.S. Senator Marco Rubio garners support from conservative Christians by sending out periodic Bible tweets.



India's Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) regularly [presents himself as a devotee](#), despite his [clear economic conservatism](#) and [disdain for the poor](#).

The conservative right does not own spirituality

Despite scientific evidence and ongoing political relevance, many intellectuals or people affiliated with progressive movements abdicate concern with human spirituality. The irony of the dismissal of spirituality is twofold. For one, it is a losing political strategy.

It allows people like Trump and Modi to exploit human spirituality and manipulate people's spiritual sensibility, gaining support from the very constituency they will inevitably [go on to eviscerate](#). In addition, the dismissal is itself anti-science and based on a theoretical misunderstanding.

It doesn't need to be this way. The conservative right has no exclusive claim to human spirituality. In its authentic form, [human spirituality is egalitarian, progressive](#) and transformative. For example, many of Jesus's teachings resonate with socialism: in one story — [told in three variants in three books of the Bible](#) — a rich man asks Jesus what he needs to do to be perfect. Jesus says, [sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor](#). We can imagine the impact on people like Trump, Rubio and other

economic elites to being confronted with a message like that.

Human spirituality cannot be owned by any one political ideology, nor should it be. It is often [exploited](#) by conservative actors, but there is healing and progressive potential as well. As long as progressive actors abjure studying religion, reactionary ones will have free hand to misrepresent and exploit it.

Therefore, overcome what University of California at Los Angeles sociologist Linda Brookover Bourque calls a [stylized and simplistic understanding of religion](#). The next time Trump claims he loves the Bible, his hypocritical claims can be silenced by the roar of a truly enlightened progressive collective.