

## What Makes Templeton Tick? And Just How Scary Is This Place? An Inside Look

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The Templeton Foundation's broad mission, plus its sizable funding of science alongside topics like theology and free enterprise, tend to leave people either excited, furious, or just scratching their heads. We talked with a longtime leader at the foundation to better understand just what makes this unusual funder tick.

There's really no other funder out there quite like the John Templeton Foundation. While it's widely known as a science research funder, the foundation doesn't quite think of itself that way, and its wide spread of interests are driven by what it calls the "Big Questions" of human purpose and reality. So while it gives to basic research in physics, mathematics, psychology, and genetics, to name a few interests, it's gained notoriety for funding study of religion, encouraging dialogue between faith and science, and some plainly far-out concepts like research of unconditional love.

It's also no slouch in the funding world, with assets in the neighborhood of \$2.5 billion. And while the foundation has become influential in the fields it supports, it has also been the source of a lot of controversy over the years, with some scientists vocally opposing it and others quietly steering clear. Opponents' arguments can be compelling, and raise some difficult questions about science philanthropy.

But learning more about Templeton's funding, and talking to Barnaby Marsh, executive vice president of strategic initiatives and management at the foundation, you realize that it's actually harder than you might think to frame the foundation within a particular ideology, much less an agenda.

"It's really difficult actually—I'm in the middle right now of helping a team redesign our current web page—to try and explain what this foundation does. There's gifted education work, it does character work, it does genetics work, it does hard sciences work like mathematics and physical sciences, and social science work," says Marsh, who has worked at Templeton for 13 years.

“It feels like, well, that sort of sounds like anything. You just fund anything. No actually, we don’t fund anything.”

The thrust of the foundation comes from the philosophy of its founder, John Templeton, who made his fortune as an investor. He had a strong admiration for science and progress, and was also a devoted Christian. But he was no fundamentalist. He disliked dogmatic acceptance, and thought all belief should be tempered with humility and critical thought. Templeton was especially interested in how science might expand on our knowledge of concepts that haven’t historically lent themselves to scientific examination—topics like wisdom, free will, decision-making, and forgiveness.

The hallmarks of the foundation’s giving, according to Marsh, are projects with a sense of curiosity and imagination, that push beyond the comfort level of a researcher or a field of study.

“What we want to do is kind of focus on some of these questions that are not really popular, that could be really risky, but make sure we do it with the best talent possible,” he says.

To ensure rigor, proposals go through a review by foundation staff, but also by outside experts in the applicant’s field. The goal is to fund ideas that are risky, but from researchers who are safe bets, which can be a tough balance.

But the approach has resulted in some pretty fascinating stuff. One of its signature projects was seeding the Foundational Questions Institute in 2005, which makes grants that support work on the origins of the universe and other fundamental work in physics, led by MIT cosmologist Max Tegmark.

Alfred R. Mele, philosophy professor at Florida State University, has [received two grants](#) of around \$4.5 million for study of free will and self-control. A recent [\\$4.9 million grant](#) will support Arizona State’s Institute of Human Origins, led by prominent anthropologist Donald Johanson. And smaller project grants include 2013 support to evolutionary biologists at the University of Arizona studying origins of new genes and diversity of life, for example.

So where does the uneasiness around Templeton’s science funding come from? It’s a lengthy debate that I’ll briefly synopsise here. But *Nature* did an even-tempered [analysis](#) in 2011. And to read some of the strongest criticism, University of Chicago evolutionary biologist [Jerry Coyne](#) has blogged eloquently on the subject.

Opposition basically boils down to a few concerns: First, there’s the idea that Templeton has a conservative agenda. The foundation has a program on free enterprise, and has funded think tanks like the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute, and the Mercatus Center. This perception has been heightened by the fact that John Templeton’s son Jack Templeton, now president and chair of the foundation, personally supports conservative political causes.

Then there’s the idea that the foundation is using its work in science to bolster a religious perspective, basically trying to add an air of scientific credibility to religion.

Finally, there's a principled argument against the foundation's notion that science and religion can coexist comfortably. Detractors say the principles of each are just fundamentally at odds, with religion undermining the virtues of science.

This was perhaps best summed up by physicist Sean Carroll, in a blog post he wrote entitled "[Science and Religion Can't Be Reconciled](#)." Carroll puts it best himself, but he argues against Templeton's notion that science and religion should be rubbing shoulders, or the idea that they are "just different paths to the same ultimate truth."

Barnaby Marsh says the foundation is well aware of such criticisms, and has seen strong distrust over the years, especially in the early days before it had established more of a track record. But the foundation is not averse to criticism, especially from an atheist perspective.

"As far as I'm concerned that's great. That's a perspective in the discussion. It's good to be critical, and you really see that when they try to take something apart, they do it very carefully."

One thing that would probably surprise people about Templeton is that its grants are much more diverse and much less ideological than you might expect. In fact, the foundation uses "spiritual" almost as a blanket term for concepts that are nebulous or outside of existing scientific understanding.

Part of this diversity of interests has to do with the sheer size of the foundation and number of programs it runs. Other than its very broad mission, there's no real control mechanism to ensure individual programs are following a central objective, Marsh says. A lot of ideas are on the table, in terms of what they are willing to take a risk on, and the foundation has no issue with funding researchers who disagree with other grants or John Templeton's ideas.

"It doesn't really bother anybody in the foundation. That's the whole idea. If we don't have people who are critical, ideas are not going to advance. Ideas advance when they get attacked and when attention is drawn to them."

If anything, Marsh says they've seen the worst resistance from religious fundamentalists, who mistake them for a Christian funder, or want them to support more orthodox ideas.

"That's very difficult to engage with those sorts of people. Because they've sort of decided what they're going to decide. They believe what they're going to believe. And it's very hard to advance and to learn anything new if you've already decided what your conclusions are."

Doesn't really sound like a religious funder, right?

Which is not to say that there are no valid arguments against the Templeton Foundation. It's a polarizing debate in the scientific community, but one with very astute people on either side.

For example, the funding of right-wing groups is a real thing. John Templeton, like a lot of wealthy people, was a devotee of the free market, and interested in advancing laissez-faire ideas.

The foundation has made regular grants to outfits with an anti-government message that progressives will find repellent.

The foundation's support of an interface between faith and science that Carroll wrote about is also totally real. The staff believe there's a place for science in the world of people who are religious, and one of its major initiatives is a program with the AAAS that funds seminars to teach future religious leaders science. There are researchers who oppose such programs.

All of this gets to a very Big Question in philanthropy: Is it a good idea to accept funds from an entity that believes or supports things to which you are ideologically opposed?

And this is especially important in science as government funding is threatened, and more research is supported by wealthy individuals or their proxies.

Even though researchers report positive experiences with the foundation, it may still have an outlook on science or fund ideas with which researchers wouldn't want to be associated. And that's fair.

But Templeton clearly doesn't have a problem with doing things that are unpopular.

“Our key is trying to reach people who have that question that they always wanted to work on, but they could never get funding for it because it just didn't fit squarely into what was hot in the field at that time,” Marsh says. “We really want those people to hear about the foundation and to know that that's not a barrier for this foundation. Just because it's not popular, it's not a barrier.”