Strange Lab Partners

God, science and a $1.6 million prize intersect in a Conshohocken office park.

by Alicia Puglionesi

Published: August 20, 2008

Tucked into the fifth floor of a generic office park in suburban West Conshohocken, the Templeton Foundation's unlikely headquarters belies its financial potency. Every year the foundation doles out the largest scientific jackpot in the world — currently $1.6 million, bigger than the Nobel Peace Prize — and yet many researchers, writers and theorists wouldn't touch it with a sterilized 10-foot pole.

"Once you get Templeton money," says John Horgan, a journalist and director of the Center for Science Writings at the Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken, N.J., "you feel obligated to them. But also, you want more of it." Horgan ambivalently accepted a monthlong Templeton fellowship in 2005. He recalls that he was encouraged to "play my cards right" — and when he published an article in the Chronicle of Higher Education questioning the foundation's core goal of reconciling science and religion, he was promptly denounced by fellowship program co-director Julia Vitullo-Martin. Even the other participants, he says, "thought I was rude and ungrateful ... but as an independent journalist, I was obliged to write those things — I was obliged to write exactly what I saw and not what fit an official agenda."
The money that tempted Horgan and many others was Sir John Templeton's money. His foundation, established in 1987, is currently worth $1.5 billion and gave out $70 million in grants last year. Its distinctive ideology and mission were Sir John Templeton's, as well, but now everything rests in the hands of a 12-member board of trustees, the executers of his vast philanthropic estate. On July 8, the 95-year-old investment tycoon died of pneumonia in a hospital room in the Bahamas. It was an unlikely close to a life that began in the heartland of rural Tennessee, only 60 miles from the site of the Scopes "monkey trial" and worlds away from the Yale, Oxford and Wall Street circles through which Sir John would pass in the course of amassing his billion-dollar fortune. "Sir John was a visionary," says Steven Post, director of the Center for Medical Humanities, Compassionate Care and Bioethics at New York's Stony Brook University, and a recent appointee to the foundation's board. "He had this buoyancy and cheerfulness." On that count, at least, the generally skeptical Horgan agrees: "I never met him, but everyone said he was a wonderful guy. I see him as one of those kindly, eccentric billionaire types."

Sir John's creation has provoked equally vehement praise and criticism over the years: He imagined a world in which his deeply rooted faith could be buttressed by scientific facts — a world in which the great advances of the 20th century, rather than rendering religion obsolete, could somehow prove its deeper reality. "Sir John was a classical Presbyterian; he knew his Bible," says Post, who maintained a correspondence with the elder Templeton ever since they struck up a friendship at a Cambridge symposium in 1997. The two men exchanged "probably over a hundred pages ... Sir John didn't e-mail, you know, he was a faxer." "But," Post continues, "it's certainly the case that he was ambivalent about religion."

Many of Sir John's published writings are devoted to "humility theory," which describes the pitfalls of religious zealotry. "Religions can become arrogant, become convinced of their absolute truth or superiority," Post explains, "and then things degrade into violence. Sir John was, in the mid-'90s, predicting that there would be big problems in the world based on religious fundamentalism." So, as much as Sir John hoped to affirm certain spiritual truths, he was also prepared for some level of debunking. He funded research on touchy subjects like evolution and the Big Bang, while trying to salvage the "core themes" of religion with studies of love, forgiveness, generosity and humility. Before Sir John Templeton came along, this kind of work was often dismissed as "soft science" — subjective, conjectural, empirically unsound — and received little funding from mainstream governmental or private sources. Today, thanks largely to Templeton funding, groups like the Metanexus Institute and the Institute for Research on Unlimited Love (of which Steven Post is founder and president) are thriving. Scrape the surface of a neuroimaging project, a university lecture series or an astrophysics symposium, and you'll often find Sir John's money. Scrape a little further and you may find the signature of the man himself: an open-minded, inquisitive but ultimately inviolable faith in some transcendent force underpinning our universe.

This is not just a story about a dead man and the way he used his money. The obituaries tell that story fairly well; what remains is the story of the Templeton Foundation's future according to its enemies, allies and heirs. For years, there's been talk of the elder Templeton differing with his son, Dr. John "Jack" Templeton Jr., over the level of religious evangelism the Foundation should endorse. Jack is a born-again Christian, and his prominent sponsorship of conservative causes has created image problems for the foundation. He was a founding member of the right-wing group Let Freedom Ring and made sizable donations to the 2000 and 2004 Bush campaigns; in the recent primaries, he gave $4,600 to Mitt Romney, and has since supported Sen. John McCain with the maximum individual donation of $2,300. All of this, of course, comes from Jack's personal savings, yet his activities provide a lightning rod for critics who sense the foundation siding with religion over genuine science. Issues like the denial of evolution, which has entangled Templeton in the past, are never far in the background. "Jack is much more conservative, much more interested in promoting a specific form of Christianity," says Horgan. Comparing Jack with his relatively apolitical father, Horgan recalls, "Sir John was a religious man, but he didn't evangelize; he also questioned."

Concerns about the future of the foundation are widely shared. Even though Sir John retired as president in 1995, letting his son step into the role, he was a charismatic presence well into his 90s. In 2006, Sir John stepped down as chairman of the board and Jack assumed that job, as well, effectively consolidating his leadership of the foundation. (Jack Templeton was not available for an interview before press time.)

In the so-called war between science and religion, beleaguered scientists feel particularly threatened by people like Jack Templeton, a card-carrying conservative evangelical with a multibillion-dollar science foundation in his grasp. But the
polarizing simplicity of such a characterization broke down when I spoke with Post about the foundation's future. For one thing, Jack will certainly not have free rein in his father's absence. "I got a chance to look at some of the paperwork," says Post of his first few board meetings, "and the bylaws are full of iron-clad mechanisms and safety valves. Sir John was very careful and clear about his wishes and there is no way on earth that the foundation will ever be derailed from his mission. ... The parameters," he assures, "are locked down pretty tight.

"I know Jack very well," Post says thoughtfully. "He wants to support only the best kinds of science. ... There's no question in my mind of his loyalty to his father's legacy." Though Post pauses frequently to gather his thoughts — discussing the living Templeton is more sensitive than extolling the legacy of the deceased — he seems genuinely impressed with Jack's leadership to date. He brings up an element of the junior Templeton's biography that may be more critical to the foundation than any religious and political sideline: John "Jack" Templeton Jr. is a Harvard-educated doctor, a former professor at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine and a fellow of the American College of Surgeons — a medical man at heart. "Jack comes from a scientific background," Post explains. "He reads a huge number of studies very carefully and his interpretations reflect a high level of analysis." While the father was, in Horgan's characterization, a "kindly eccentric billionaire," the son might be the kind of meticulous manager that the foundation needs to avoid the boondoggles and "soft science" projects that have entangled it in the past.

There are two primary critiques of the Templeton Foundation: One maintains that Templeton's money merely pays for religious apologists to come up with new, high-tech explanations for God — contrary to the very nature of science. The second critique comes from the laboratories and classrooms. For many researchers, the problem with Templeton is that they sponsor unsound science. For instance, says Horgan, "They are supporting a lot of projects in theoretical physics and cosmology that have very little to do with empirical evidence. It's quasi-theological stuff, speculative stuff." Grant recipients featured on the Templeton Web site include a "Science, Consciousness and Ultimate Reality" symposium in Scotland, and a project titled "Construction of the Interstellar Messages Describing the Evolution of Altruistic Behavior," based at the SETI Institute in Mountain View, Calif., which aims to "capture the essence of altruistic love" for translation and communication to "extraterrestrial intelligence."

A man like Jack Templeton, rather than steering the foundation over a cliff, could go a long way in countering this second, empirical critique. Sir John was fascinated by the promise of science, its seemingly limitless capabilities, but professional experience in the medical field can temper that kind of idealism. When asked how the father and son diverged, Steven Post hesitated to lay down a side-by-side comparison. "There are, of course, differences in personality," he says. "Sir John was really excited by prayer studies and all that. Jack is more cautious, less eager to engage in things that are really outside the envelope. He is very well-trained scientifically." Post pauses again, as if pondering the fact that his own work on "the study of unlimited love" could conceivably fall outside the envelope.

"Sir John wanted the best science," Post went on to explain, "but probably was a little less engaged with the methodological detail of things, which he entrusted to various advisors. Jack has a very refined approach — he knows from experience what good research methods are." In the two years since Jack assumed the chairmanship of the board, no radical sea change has occurred; the foundation's bylaws and the voting power of other board members guarantee that in the big picture, business as usual will be hard to overhaul. And Jack has no reason to overhaul Templeton's big picture — his eye, it seems, is for the details. If change comes, it will be subtle, in the form of more exacting standards.

The watchword on the future of the Templeton Foundation is vigilance, on the part of both scientists and the public: "The foundation has enormous power over the science/religion debate," warns Horgan, "but it can still be a positive force if everyone is really vigilant in looking for potential bias in the dialogue. ... They need constant scrutiny." Horgan's greatest concern lay in Jack's conservative political and religious beliefs, but if Post's impressions are correct, then perhaps the greatest scrutiny in the foundation's future will come from the pinnacle of its own ranks. Sir John's lifelong motto, "How little we know. How eager to learn," may have guided his son to a new conclusion: "How eager to learn. How rigorous our peer review."