

Take the money

There's no harm in scientists accepting funding from philanthropists whose ideas they disagree with, says **Michael Brooks**

WHAT a shame that the University of the South Pacific doesn't have a great physics department. If it did, one of its professors might stand a chance of winning the Templeton Prize for Progress Toward Research or Discoveries about Spiritual Realities. The prize is handed to the recipient by the Duke of Edinburgh, a man considered by some villagers in the South Pacific to be the Messiah. Imagine how satisfying it would be for the professor to go home and announce that the British duke is the balding son of an exiled Greek prince, not the son of God. He could cross off one of the world's religions as demonstrably false: a real discovery about a spiritual reality.

At £820,000, the Templeton prize is the world's largest annual monetary award to an individual. It is given for the use of science to "supplement the wonderful ancient scriptures and traditions of all the world's religions". Or as Richard Dawkins put it in his best-seller *The God Delusion*, "usually to a scientist who is prepared to say something nice about religion".

It used to be fun to laugh about who had been awarded the prize, and to try to work out why. According to the foundation, part of the rationale is to "help people see the infinity of the Universal Spirit still creating the galaxies". Surely it's a joke, and a good one too: is this universal spirit also creating dark matter?

In recent years, though, the humour has been blown away by a flurry of controversy. Dawkins complains that by accepting the prize, scientists risk being seen as endorsing religion, while evolutionary biologist Jerry Coyne argues that it corrupts science. Physicist Sean Carroll insisted that he would not apply for grants from the Foundational Questions Institute (FQXi), set up in 2005 to address some esoteric questions of cosmology and physics, while Templeton remains the sole funder. With the 2008 prize being announced this week, plenty more column inches will undoubtedly be given to the claim that Templeton funding taints science.



So should scientists take the money? Time for full disclosure. In 2005 I was one of 10 journalists to benefit from a Journalism Fellowship in Science and Religion. I took an unpaid sabbatical from my day job, and received a stipend from the John Templeton Foundation to go to the University of Cambridge and listen to, and debate with, a stellar cast of lecturers. (One of them was Dawkins, who accepted money for this, with all expenses covered by the foundation.)

That said, I can declare that the curmudgeons are missing the point. The foundation is simply the expensive hobby of a rich old man. If John Templeton wants to spend a few billion dollars sponsoring people who study something he is curious about, that's great. This year's jackpot winner is Michael Heller, a Polish cosmologist and priest. He has practised both science and religion in difficult circumstances – under regimes that repressed religious and intellectual activity – and I don't begrudge him one penny of the cash.

There is no evidence that Templeton

money is subverting science; in fact the opposite may be true. FQXi, for example, is a network of research projects headed by the respected physicists Max Tegmark and Anthony Aguirre. The questions it addresses are traditionally not well funded by government sources, so the money allows good scientists to do good science without draining the coffers for researchers in other fields.

Surely, in an era when science's traditional funding sources are drying up, to refuse this support is to look a gift horse in the mouth. You might as well question the decision of Harvard University to accept millions of dollars from billionaire Jeffrey Epstein. That money went into research in cancer, viruses and evolutionary theory, basically because Epstein is fascinated by those subjects. Would you tell him that science doesn't need his money? Even when Epstein subsequently faced charges of soliciting sex with prostitutes in 2006, Harvard did not join the politicians scrabbling to return his cash. The university's president said the "tangible benefits" of accepting controversial gifts "should overcome the more abstract, symbolic considerations that might lead us to turn down such benefactions".

There is no evidence of any attempt to sway academics. Paul Davies and John Barrow, for example, haven't noticeably skewed their research portfolio towards religion since winning the prize. It's hard to get Barrow to talk about religion at all. And the prize money is being spent wisely. The 2005 winner, Charles Townes, gave most of his prize to his alma mater, Furman University in South Carolina. Philosopher Charles Taylor, who won in 2007, said he would use his award to fund further research. I don't know what Barrow did with his money in 2006, but knowing his inclinations I imagine most of it has gone to fund educational projects. If he used it to buy cocaine and prostitutes, he didn't invite me to the party.

Worrying about the Templeton prize is silly. If John Templeton has a religious agenda for projects like FQXi, he is the world's worst investor. Not a penny of his investment will prove anything about the validity of religion. It will, however, help us understand a little more about the universe. With Templeton funding, science is the only winner. Just don't tell him. ●

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