

SPIRITUAL INFORMATION

Spiritual Information

100 PERSPECTIVES ON SCIENCE AND RELIGION

Edited by Charles L. Harper Jr.



ESSAYS IN HONOR OF SIR JOHN
TEMPLETON'S 90TH BIRTHDAY

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“How little we know, how eager to learn.”

—Sir John Templeton

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THIS BOOK offers perspectives from many creative minds. Ninety of the essays included here were presented to Sir John Templeton on the occasion of his ninetieth birthday on November 29, 2002. To wish him continued strength of body and mind toward his centenary celebration, we have here collected a total of one hundred celebratory contributions for publication. These essays have been drawn together around the central theme constituting Templeton's core philanthropic vision: to stimulate progress in the domain of the spirit. His aim has been to provide philanthropic resources to support the growth and development of an academically rigorous arena of research and debate engaged in this challenge, bringing together the dynamism of the sciences with the diversity of the spiritual quest. The aim, as he puts it, is to generate "new spiritual information."

This term is rather loosely defined in the context of Templeton's interests. First, the idea reflects a desire to avoid the stasis of closure. Why consider God only through a lens of fixed tradition without training the eye on anything new? In the quest of the spirit, why not look to the open and progressive model of science, which intrinsically abhors closure and for which the adventure of new discovery is everything? Templeton's vision seeks to encourage people to cultivate a mindset of looking at the spiritual quest simultaneously as an adventure open to new insights from a wide variety of sources and as an endeavor to be taken seriously by using whatever methods of research might be fruitful.

This idea embraces a contrarian vision: to look to sources not typically thought of in connection with spiritual matters. Such sources may include, among others, scientific inquiry, innovation through entrepreneurial competition within the religious sector, new insights from research on the virtues, or careful study of the differences separating different spiritual traditions based on serious consideration and reflection.

New insights also may come from relatively "pedestrian" sources. Consider, for example, opinion polls. New spiritual information can be as simple as new statistical information on a spiritual topic—for example, results on what fraction of the population of a country prays regularly, or what percentage has had an intense spiritual experience of some sort, or what the correlations might be between spirituality and personality type or specific social and cultural circumstances. There is nothing particularly deep about such information, yet it may be useful knowledge. It may help people to approach the challenge of spiritual progress in a well-informed way.

On the other hand, "new spiritual information" may refer to insights that are specifically deep and theological in nature. The Templeton vision is properly hedged with the caveat that the challenge of making progress in the "things of God" is by no means as mundane as matters of research results, assembly lines, and international

electronic equities trading markets: *Deus semper maior* (“God is always greater” [than human attempts at understanding]). For example, new spiritual information might have to do with scientific and philosophical analyses of the question of freedom or openness in the physical world—thus informing the continuing complex debate over the classic problem of evil in theology. Or it may have to do with insights into the mind obtained directly through prayer or meditation. Or it may be focused on understanding spiritual themes, such as the mystery of love without limits. Or it may have to do with scientific insights into the unseen, such as the nomic order implicit in the concept of the laws of nature. Or it may have to do with aspects of the rich strangeness of the veiled aspect of quantum reality.

These examples offer a spectrum of wide differences in considering what new spiritual information could be. The point is to open up inquiry into a broad range of types of potential new information pertinent to and focused on various spiritual topics. The idea of open-mindedness as demonstrated in the range of essays in this book also includes a commitment to a belief in the virtues of debate. Thus, challenges to Sir John Templeton’s vision are included. Such welcoming of a clash of differences is very much a part of the Templeton way. Critical perspectives are encouraged. Taking account of different points of view is an important part of any effort to learn in a truly open-minded manner.

One way to understand the Templeton mindset is to see it as supporting alternatives to both religious and scientific fundamentalisms. Fundamentalisms seek the simple picture conducive to closed-mindedness and are uncomfortable with an open adventure in seeking truth through polyphony and with appropriate humility. Rather, they seek to own the truth. And in the science-religion relationship, fundamentalisms of both the “for” and “against” varieties tend to focus on pushing a clear-cut clash, typically between (philosophically loaded interpretations of) modern scientific theories and (usually simplistic literal interpretations of) ancient religious texts.

One of the most central insights into the idea of new spiritual information is that the desire for acquiring it logically follows from a change in mindset: An open-minded quest is possible once the idea of thinking of religion as only a matter of preserving ancient tradition is discarded in favor of a different approach that drops the presumption that one’s particular ancient tradition owns the sum total of Truth (and, in contrast, that competing traditions correspondingly are seen to hold either all or part of Falsehood). For this primary reason, Sir John Templeton has described his vision as the “humble approach.”

Another aspect of the humble approach engages the notion that human beings are likely to apprehend the infinite richness of Divine Reality in unavoidably limited ways, if only because of the immense mismatch between our perceptual apparatus and the infinite reality of God. Templeton sometimes illustrates this second aspect of the humble approach with a characteristic question: “Is the human ability to understand God just as impossible as the ability of a clam to understand the ocean?”

A third aspect of the humble-approach mindset is to respect and appreciate lessons taken from the astonishing success of the scientific and technological enterprise

in transforming human knowledge and in creating useful innovations. Rather than seeing science and technology as competitors for the big story, or somehow together as a modern antireligion that deflates all meanings external to itself, why should people seeking spiritual insight not instead be open-minded and enthusiastic to gain from possible insights that the scientific and technological enterprise might have to offer? Such insights do not require anything particularly odd. They may simply come from reflecting on the complex elegance of what science has discovered about the nature of the physical world (e.g., the “laws” of nature) and the life within it, and thus by implication about the creative wisdom upholding the order of nature itself. Or they may appreciate the dynamism with which technological innovation has transformed the quality of human life in myriad ways that we typically take for granted—from clean water, antiviral vaccines, and tomographic scanners to airplanes, computers, and the Internet.

Sir John Templeton’s vision is one of constant learning. His motto, and that of all the charitable foundations he has created, is “How little we know, how eager to learn.” The John Templeton Foundation exists to provide support to gifted thinkers who want to push the boundaries and are not afraid to do so, recognizing that many vitally important issues require vision, leadership, and risk-taking beyond the often overly narrow confines of specialized scholarship. The purpose of this collection of one hundred essays is to exemplify the Templeton vision of adventure from a wide diversity of points of view.

By fostering excellence in rigorous, multidisciplinary research among scientists, theologians, and other thinkers, Sir John Templeton’s fervent wish is to unite inquiry into the essential nature of the universe through the scientific method with humanity’s basic spiritual and religious quest to understand human and cosmic purpose. In so doing, the John Templeton Foundation draws together in an ongoing substantive dialog many talented representatives from a broad spectrum of fields of expertise, such as those whose work is represented in this volume. Were it not for Sir John’s vision, the profound and wide-ranging output of this amazing and inspiring group of one hundred experts from various fields could not have been represented in the same published work. Our hope in presenting this one-hundredfold tribute to Sir John is that it will inspire others to pursue his quest to discover “over one hundredfold more spiritual information than humankind has ever possessed before.”

Charles L. Harper Jr.
Vice President and Executive Director
John Templeton Foundation
December 2004
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

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MANY PEOPLE collaborated to bring this book to fruition in honor of the ninetieth birthday of Sir John Templeton on November 29, 2002.

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The one hundred authors whose work constitutes this volume also have my deep thanks. The talent, knowledge, and dedication to the pursuit of truth exemplified by all of the contributors made working on this book very enjoyable and stimulating.

The person who really carried the day on the project was Pamela Bond Contractor of Ellipsis Enterprises, whose effort was very substantial indeed. Pam served as developmental editor and project manager, and her Herculean efforts, assisted by Margaret Brennan, brought this large project to completion in a highly efficient and skillful manner.

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PART ONE

*Perspectives on Sir John Templeton's Two Domains—
Spiritual Capital and Spiritual Information*



SPIRITUAL INFORMATION AND THE SENSE OF WONDER 1

THE CONVERGENCE OF SPIRITUALITY AND THE NATURAL SCIENCES

Alister E. McGrath

ONE OF THE MANY THEMES that have been deeply explored in recent years has been the way in which our growing understanding of the cosmos leads to an enhanced spirituality. In other words, we seek a more profound understanding and appreciation of the universe in which we live and of the God who we believe to have created it in such a way that it sparkles and scintillates with divine beauty and wisdom (Goodenough 1998; Ebert 1999). This quest is thanks in large part to the generous sponsorship of publications and conferences by the John Templeton Foundation that have sought to catalyze the process of reflection and advancement from both the scientific and religious perspectives.

While a “spirituality of the natural sciences” is still in its emergent phase, it is clear that a number of points need to be examined in considerable detail if this field of research is to achieve its considerable potential. This essay was written to celebrate the stimulus given to the study of science and religion by the personal vision of Sir John Templeton, while at the same time exploring a possible framework for developing the new discipline’s insights. Through this essay, I aim to advance this important agenda by exploring a major issue that arises in the attempt to develop a spirituality of the natural sciences: How can we hold the generalizations of theory together with a continued concern for and loving attention to the particularities of the natural world?

The essence of the process of theorizing may be thought of as an attempt to identify universal a posteriori patterns in local situations and represent those patterns in a language appropriate to its subject matter. Often, in the case of the natural sciences, the most appropriate language is that of mathematics. The intellectual challenge here is to preserve and respect locality while discerning universality—that is to say, to ensure that the particularities of the observed situation are not displaced or superseded by the universal patterns they are held to disclose.

Theory tames reality, reducing it to manageable proportions and allowing it to be visualized in terms adapted to human reasoning. Experience is to be reduced to repeatable formulas; phenomena are to be represented formally through mathematics. In this sense, theory can be seen as embodying a central theme of the Enlightenment: the desire to reduce everything to what Descartes called “clear and distinct ideas.” This concern can be seen throughout the development of modern natural science, from Newton to Einstein, in which reality is to be reduced and represented in terms conforming to three global categories: accuracy, simplicity, and generalizability (Latour 1993).