

SCIENCE AND RELIGION

Latest Prize Bolsters Templeton's Shift to Mainstream

In 2005, molecular biologist Matthew Gibson wondered whether to accept a grant he had received from the John Templeton Foundation to study how the apparently random process of cell division leads to a predictable honeycombed pattern in the epithelium of many organisms. Gibson, then a postdoc at Harvard Medical School in Boston, knew that the foundation was interested in how order emerges from randomness, a pet theme for proponents of intelligent design (ID). If he took the grant, Gibson wondered, would he be playing into a religious agenda?

Gibson was not the only scientist to harbor such doubts about the foundation, which seeks to promote a dialogue between science and religion. In the past, Templeton has supported conferences and projects linked to the Discovery Institute, an ID think tank. But it subsequently disavowed support for the ID movement, allaying the fears of many critics. This week, the foundation took another step in that direction by awarding its annual \$1.5 million Templeton Prize to Francisco Ayala, a priest-turned-biologist who for decades has campaigned against the teaching of creationism and ID in the science classroom.

The 76-year-old Ayala, a professor at the University of California, Irvine, has sought to foster mutual respect between science and religion through lectures and writings on topics such as morality. "If they are properly understood, they *cannot* be in contradiction because science and religion concern different matters," says Ayala, a former president of AAAS (publisher of *Science*). He says the conflict has grown less intense since Templeton funds helped to launch a program in the mid-1990s called Dialogue on Science, Ethics, and Religion at AAAS, which continues to be supported by the foundation. Some scientists objected at the time, he recalls. "They said, 'What business does science have talking to religion?' I don't think there are many thoughtful scientists who would make that point today."

However, some remain staunchly opposed to Templeton's mission. "They are using the prestige and authority of science to improve the prestige and credibility of theology," says Daniel Dennett, a philosopher at

Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts. In his opinion, Templeton-funded discussions between scientists and religious figures do for religion what debates between ID proponents and evolutionary biologists would do for ID: "They create the perception that scientists and theologians are academic co-equals, which they are not."

One program that Dennett worried has a religious slant is the Science of Generosity initiative at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, begun last year with \$5 million from the foundation. The program has awarded a handful of research grants, including \$250,000 to study how empathy affects charitable donation and \$400,000 to explore how generosity spreads through

ton's mission agree that the foundation does not attempt to influence the outcomes of the research and discussions it sponsors. "I am not enthusiastic about the message they seem to be selling to the public—that science and religion are not incompatible; I think there is real tension between the two," says Steven Weinberg, a Nobel Prize-winning physicist at the University of Texas, Austin, who has been an outspoken critic of religion. "But for an organization with a message, they are pretty good at not being intrusive in the activities they fund. I don't wish them well, but I don't think they are particularly insidious or dangerous."

The foundation has also recognized the pitfalls of associating with the ID commu-

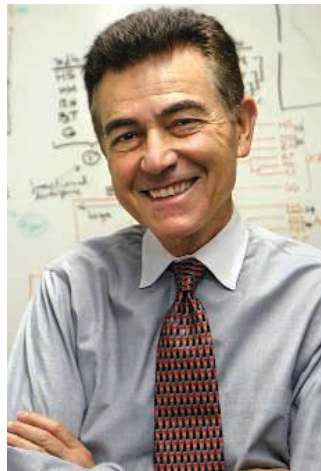
nity after being criticized by scientists for giving a grant in 1999 to ID proponent William Dembski, a fellow at the Discovery Institute, and later to Guillermo Gonzales, an astronomer at Iowa State University who used the funds to research a book arguing in favor of ID. In a 2007 letter to the *Los Angeles Times*, Templeton's former vice president for communications explained that "[i]n the past, we have given grants to scientists who have gone on to identify themselves as members of the intelligent-design community. We understand that this could be misconstrued by some to suggest that we implicitly support the move-

ment, but this was not our intention at the time, nor is it today."

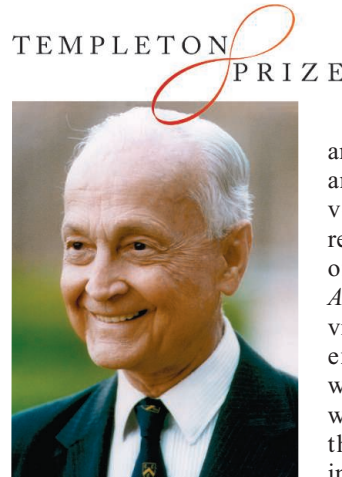
Barbara Forrest, a philosopher at Southeastern Louisiana University in Hammond, says that "Templeton realized that the relationship was a liability to their mission."

Gibson says he decided to accept the foundation's money "after poking around and finding nothing fishy." Now a researcher at the Stowers Institute for Medical Research in Kansas City, Missouri, Gibson admits that he may have been influenced by need. "At the time, I don't think anybody else would have funded what we were doing." But he's pleased with how things turned out, including a paper in *Nature*. "The fact that the [foundation] appreciated a philosophical element of the research—which I was neutral about—is fine with me," he says.

—YUDHIJIT BHATTACHARJEE



Awardee. Francisco Ayala (left) is the latest winner of a \$1.5 million prize from the foundation created by John Templeton.



social networks. "What they are trying to do is to paint certain topics with a holy glow," says Dennett.

Not so, says the program's director, Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith. He says the initiative in no way presumes that generosity "is somehow God-given." The choice of the term "generosity," he explains, was to create an umbrella theme for different but related topics such as altruism and voluntary blood donation. "Most projects that we're going to fund will be about operations of the mind, social psychology, and related concepts," he says. Joseph Henrich, an anthropologist at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, does not see a religious taint. "There may be a little bit of marketing" in how the program has been framed, he says, "but it's perfectly legitimate."

Even those who are put off by Temple-