

TEMPLETON REPORT

NEWS FROM THE JOHN TEMPLETON FOUNDATION

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Healing Body and Soul

In late June, the Society for Spirituality, Theology, and Health (SSTH) held its first annual conference at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. Thanks to a \$1.4 million grant from the Templeton Foundation, the society—the brainchild of Harold Koenig and Keith Meador, both of them professors at Duke’s School of Medicine—is already off to a strong start. The summer conference drew more than 250 attendees from a range of disciplines, including medicine, theology, philosophy, and public health.

“All other major fields in medicine have a membership society, and we need one too,” says Koenig, who has spent much of his career studying the relationship between health and spirituality. The field, he notes, has been growing at an extraordinary rate and can now point to the completion of some 3,000 studies. “There has been more research in the last 7 or 8 years,” he told the *Templeton Report*, “than in the previous 150.”



Harold Koenig

JTF has long been involved with the work of Koenig and other pioneers in the field. “It goes back at least to the mid-90s,” says Paul Wason, Templeton’s director of life sciences, “when we were especially interested in studying the impact of religious attendance and prayer on health outcomes.” The late Sir John Templeton believed that there was a strong link between spiritual and physical well-being, and the Foundation’s current president, John M. Templeton, Jr., who is himself a retired pediatric surgeon, gave the opening remarks at the SSTH conference.



Keith Meador

The featured speakers covered many different issues. Kenneth Pargament, a professor of psychology at Bowling Green State University, gave a talk about the role of religion in coping with stress and trauma. He spoke not only about people who embrace religion as a result of negative experiences in their lives but also about those who are struggling with their faith as a result of such events. Ellen Idler, a professor of sociology at Rutgers University, gave a lecture about how religion affects the health of the elderly, addressing in particular the question of declining spirituality in aging populations.

The field of spirituality and health has gained some acceptance in the medical establishment over the last few years, with centers now established at Duke, George Washington University, Massachusetts General Hospital, and institutions abroad like the University of Aberdeen in Scotland. But Koenig acknowledges that many physicians still consider it a “fringe” area. With another grant from JTF, Koenig and Meador will be doing a survey of deans at medical schools, nursing schools, and public-health graduate programs to see what they think of this line of inquiry.

Studies show that active members of religious communities have lower rates of depression, cope better with illness, and tend to recover more quickly. But there are plenty of skeptics who doubt that religion itself explains these positive effects. They see the health benefits as a result not of spiritual involvement as such but of the social support that religious groups often provide. Koenig suggests that, on this issue, the research findings have been fairly conclusive. Summarizing an array of studies in the field, he estimates that “social factors account for only 15 percent of this effect. In other words, you can’t get the same benefits from joining a bridge club.”

As for the question of when prayer is appropriate in medical settings, Koenig explains that there is a spectrum of views within the new Society for Spirituality, Theology, and Health. “Some scholars say that patients shouldn’t pray with healthcare professionals, only with chaplains or clergy. Others say that prayer is not that complex, that you don’t need a divinity degree to do it. And that nurses and doctors may engage in prayer, as long as the patient wants to, of course.”

Koenig hopes that the society will not only connect scholars with each other but also draw grants from other sources. Many of the studies that have been done, he notes, were not designed to examine the relationship between health and religious activity. Researchers simply happened upon their results in the course of exploring other questions, which makes Koenig worry about the quality of their findings.

In September, Koenig made his case to several members of Congress, suggesting that the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation should get more involved in the field to ensure that the highest research standards are maintained. The Templeton Foundation has offered \$600,000 in matching funds for such initiatives if another funder also provides support.

In the meantime, Koenig and his colleagues are looking ahead. They have already issued a call for papers for next year’s conference, which will be held in June.

NOTEBOOK

Hitchens and Albacete on Science & Belief

At a lunch event in New York City in late September, the author and vocal atheist Christopher Hitchens and the Catholic theologian Lorenzo Albacete squared off over the Big Question: “Does science make belief in God obsolete?” The debate was jointly sponsored by the Templeton Foundation and *On Faith*, the online religion forum of the *Washington Post* and *Newsweek*. Jon Meacham, the editor of *Newsweek*, and Sally Quinn of the *Washington Post* served as moderators. The event drew the notice of a number of publications, ranging from *Newsweek* and the *New York Daily News* to *Vanity Fair* and *National Review Online*.



The Equations of Evolution

Does mathematics hold the key to understanding the processes of evolution? Martin Nowak certainly thinks so. A professor of biology and mathematics at Harvard, where he directs the university’s Program for Evolutionary Dynamics, Nowak has received considerable support for his work from the Templeton Foundation. His research was recently featured in *Scientific American*.

“In the same way as Newton’s equations describe how any planet goes around the sun, and it doesn’t matter what that planet is made of,” Nowak told *Scientific American*, “math helps us to see what the most crucial and interesting experiment is. It describes a chemical system that can be built, and once it’s built, you can watch the origin of evolution.” Nowak has created formulas that attempt to describe natural selection, genetic mutation and drift, and population structure.



These are not the first intractable scientific questions that Nowak has tackled with his distinctively quantitative approach. In previous research, he developed mathematical explanations for how cancer evolves and spreads and for the progressive stages by which HIV defeats the immune system. “I don’t know what the ‘ultimate understanding’ of biology will look like,” he told the magazine, “but one thing is clear: it’s all about getting the equations right.”

Copernicus Center Opens in Poland

The Copernicus Center for Interdisciplinary Studies, funded in large part by Michael Heller, the 2008 Templeton Prize Laureate, formally opened on October 2nd at a ceremony at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow. A joint venture of the university and the Pontifical Academy of Theology (also in Krakow), the Copernicus Center will focus on the mutual relations among theology, science, and philosophy, offering courses and public lectures and several publications, in both English and Polish.



A cosmologist and Catholic priest, Heller was named the winner of the Templeton Prize at a March 12th news conference in New York City, where he also announced his plans to dedicate the proceeds of the award to the creation of the Copernicus Center. He has lived and taught in Krakow for two decades. The world’s largest annual monetary award given to an individual, the Templeton Prize was valued in 2008 at 820,000 pounds sterling (more than \$1.6 million).

For more information, write to communications@templeton.org.

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