
The Philanthropic Vision of Sir John Templeton

Sir John Templeton wrote extensively on spirituality and the role that scientific research could play in expanding the spiritual horizons of humankind. The most comprehensive single account of his views is the volume titled *Possibilities for Over One Hundredfold More Spiritual Information: The Humble Approach in Theology and Science* (2000). Here he set forth his beliefs, his vision of the future, and his intentions for the John Templeton Foundation.

In a subsequent and complementary collection of essays, *Wisdom from World Religions: Pathways toward Heaven on Earth* (2002), Sir John expanded on his spiritual and theological beliefs. In this volume, he stressed the universality of the search for spiritual insight and underscored the historic contributions to human wisdom provided by the world's various religions and cultures.

In both of these works, Sir John frequently posed rhetorical questions designed to call attention to new possibilities for spiritual awareness and growth that previously may have been rejected, ignored, or overlooked. In the realms of both science and spirituality, he emphasized, we presently have far more questions than answers.

In an earlier book, *Worldwide Laws of Life: 200 Eternal Spiritual Principles* (1997), Sir John set out a number of what he saw as universal laws regarding the capacity of human beings to shape their own lives and minds in such a way as to promote personal happiness, social benefit, and spiritual progress. He firmly believed that the greatest truths might someday be available to us if we asked the Big Questions of life and existence with an attitude of humility, gratitude, and open-mindedness. As the motto he devised for his Foundation declares, "How little we know, how eager to learn."

An Era of Unprecedented Progress

Sir John was a visionary optimist. He believed that we are fortunate to live in an age with momentous opportunities for the future, brought to us by past achievements in commerce, technology, learning, and research:

Should we be overwhelmingly grateful to have been born in the 20th century? Is the slow progress of prehistoric ages now speeding up? It seems that centuries of human enterprise are now miraculously bursting into flower. Is the development of human knowledge accelerating? Is the

present generation reaping the fruits of generations of scientific thought?
[*Possibilities*, p. 51]

The answer to each of these questions was a resounding “yes”:

More than half of the scientists who ever lived are alive today. More than half of the discoveries in the natural sciences have been made from 1900 to 1999. More than half of the goods produced since the earth was born have been produced in the 20th century. Over half of the books ever written were written from 1949 to 1999. More new books are published each month than were written in the entire historical period before the birth of Columbus.
[*Possibilities*, p. 51]

Struck by the unprecedented speed of human progress today, Sir John asked whether we might not be a part of the creator’s much grander purposes:

It is a novel concept, but maybe one of the purposes of god is progress. This may touch upon a deep mystery: the purpose of freedom and the openness of creativity in the cosmos. If the cosmos and our own minds have this capacity, then maybe our activities have great usefulness and great potentiality in the creator’s designs.

Possibly divine design appears in our own freedom more than in any cosmically enforced order, such as many religious thinkers have presumed in the past when they conceived of god as having attributes of a wise king.
[*Possibilities*, p. 37]

If so, we may now be living in an age with unprecedented opportunities for spiritual growth:

Evidence indicates that the rate of spiritual development is accelerating. Throughout the two hundred thousand years of our history as a species, there have been periods of gradual growth, followed by rapid development. . . . Now, a new vision of our place and purpose in the cosmos is unfolding. Possibly, we may be setting the stage for a giant leap forward in our spiritual understanding. [*Wisdom*, p. xxii]

Our Present Ignorance

As impressive as our current knowledge may seem today, Sir John believed that it was slight

compared to the knowledge that humanity might yet achieve. Just as a person living 200 years ago could have had little understanding of what the human race has now achieved, so we, too, can have little understanding of what the next 200 years will bring:

In spite of the enormous strides made by science and the incredible power of our new instruments to reveal the secrets of the universe, large and small, we must accept in all humility that our knowledge is still limited. We cannot even be sure that the vast universe unveiled to us by our telescopes is all that exists. There may be other regions of the universe far beyond the reach of our instruments having very different properties. It is even possible that entire other universes co-exist in parallel with our own. [*Possibilities*, p. 58]

Moreover, our ignorance extends beyond the material to the spiritual:

Modern science has revolutionized our understanding of the world. This is quite obvious. But what impact have these developments had on our knowledge of God? How do we see human beings fitting into the overall scheme? We know very little—probably less than 1 percent of what can be discovered—about God and fundamental spiritual principles. [*Wisdom*, p. 80]

The “Humble Approach”

Sir John therefore believed it was necessary to adopt a “humble approach” in all of our investigations of the cosmos, both scientific and spiritual:

Our five human senses are able to comprehend only a small portion of the mysteries, forces, and spiritual realities surrounding us. Our scientific and technological achievements, while impressive, are nevertheless but a first faltering step on the road to ever greater knowledge of this wonderful cosmos, including its invisible and intangible intelligences and realities.

[*Possibilities*, p. 59]

In particular, we cannot presume that the human race represents the final stage of God’s creative process. Rather, we may be just the beginning:

Although we seem to be the most sophisticated species at present on our planet, perhaps we should not think of our place as at the end of cosmogenesis. Should we resist the pride that might tempt us to think that we are the final goal of creation? Possibly, we can become servants of creation or even helpers in divine creativity. Possibly, we are a new beginning, the



first creatures in the history of life on earth to participate consciously in the ongoing creative process. [*Possibilities*, p. 41]

In spiritual matters, particularly, Sir John urged us

. . . to explore the possibility that developing a humble approach in theology, which encourages research and engages carefully with science, may be even more fruitful than endeavors to reinvigorate inherited systems of thought, whether they be polytheistic, deistic, theistic, monotheistic, pantheistic, panentheistic, or even older concepts. [*Possibilities*, p. 10]

If mainstream religious thinkers were to adopt this view, they might help open the door to new spiritual insights of immense importance to future generations:

The question before us is whether theologians and religious scholars, clergy, and laity can also take the humble approach. If they accept the inexhaustibility of god's revelation in terms of science, as do many scientists, should they hope that revelations in terms of the spirit are also inexhaustible, vastly exceeding our capacities to grasp them? Possibly, the greater part of divine revelation, both scientific and spiritual, may still lie ahead of us, not behind us. [*Possibilities*, p. 62]

The Imperative of Scientific Advance

Sir John believed that continued scientific progress was essential, not only to provide material benefits to humanity but also to reveal and illuminate God's divine plan for the universe, of which we are a part:

Each time new laws are discovered by scientists, we potentially can learn a little more about divinity. . . . It seems as if the evolutionary process rewards emergence of the capability of purposefulness as an adaptive advantage. Can this, and the vast, complex, and sublime order of mathematical physics which undergirds it, be a mistake? Would it not be strange if a universe without purpose accidentally created humans who are so obsessed with purpose? [*Possibilities*, p. 84]

All of nature reveals something of the creator. And god is revealing himself more and more to human inquiry, not always through prophetic visions or



scriptures but through the astonishingly productive research of modern scientists. [*Possibilities*, p. 87]

For Sir John, any hope for advancement in our understanding of spiritual matters depended on strict conformity to the highest scientific standards:

A scientific approach has the benefit of being reality-focused and disciplined in relation to change. . . . So the development of new concepts in theology developed in close connection with rigorous science differs from unconstrained free thinking.

The difference involves differentiating between ideological enthusiasm versus following a careful, sober, and skeptically minded process of analysis, critical testing, and verification. Such a careful, humble approach helps ensure that experiments related to spiritual matters are done in a manner that can win respect among the best-educated people. [*Possibilities*, p. 115]

New “Spiritual Information”

Our present treasury of scientific information is the result of centuries of intense personal endeavor and, in more recent times, of research designed to foster new discoveries. Should we not seize the present moment, Sir John asked, to make a similar effort—and expend commensurate resources—to increase our store of what he called “spiritual information”?

This is the blossoming time in human creation. Evolution is accelerating. Progress is accelerating. One of god’s great blessings to human beings is change, and the present acceleration of change in the world is an overflowing of this blessing. Should those who love god devote over 1 percent of income to research for new additional spiritual information to supplement the wonderful ancient scriptures? [*Possibilities*, p. 43]

By “spiritual information,” Sir John meant

. . . the concepts from religions which have proven beneficial and which need to be supplemented through millions of dollars daily for rigorous, verifiable research, especially on those neglected basic invisible realities such as love, purpose, creativity, intellect, thanksgiving, prayer, humility, praise, thrift, compassion, invention, truthfulness, giving, and worship. [*Possibilities*, p. vii]

Scientists would play a key role in this effort:

There may be significant promise in supporting a wide range of careful and rigorous research projects by well-regarded scientists on basic areas with theological relevance and potential. [*Possibilities*, p. 11]

A primary purpose of Sir John was therefore

. . . to examine or foster the idea that through an expanded search for more knowledge, in which we are open-minded and willing to experiment, theology may produce positive results even more amazing than the discoveries of scientists that have electrified the world with their discoveries in the 20th century. [*Possibilities*, p. 10]

Free and Open Inquiry

From his experience in the management of investments and the creation of financial wealth, Sir John was impressed by the benefits of free and open competition in the marketplace. He observed that success in scientific research and many other areas of human endeavor likewise depends on free and open competition:

Freedom fosters the kind of constructive competition that makes progress possible. When the creativity, ingenuity, and competitive efforts of individuals are set free, the result can be progress and prosperity beyond anything ever before imagined. [*Possibilities*, p. 119]

Progress thrives in the context of fair and open competition. God gave us the benefit of having the magnificent capacity of creative freedom. It is a common unfortunate habit of groups in power to try to stifle this free creativity and to enforce drab conformity and uniformity. [*Possibilities*, p. 36]

Progress in Religion and Theology

Given the resistance of numerous religious leaders to innovation and change, Sir John was not surprised to note that religion is perceived, in some circles, as a cultural backwater:

Many highly educated people feel that religion is obsolete. In some senses they may have a point. We typically do not observe the kind of dynamism in religion that we see in other areas of life such as science, technology,

and business. To many, religion sometimes seems like a kind of history museum which lacks the excitement and vibrancy of other aspects of life that constantly experience innovation. [*Possibilities*, p. 9]

Sir John therefore proposed that religion pursue the same strategy that has led to progress in other fields of human endeavor:

Progress comes from constructive competition, and churches and religions can benefit greatly from it. By free competition the wheat is gradually separated from the chaff. A beneficial religion should welcome competition because when it is put to the test, the beneficial will survive and grow. Only an inferior religion needs to discourage competition, lest its inferiority be exposed for all the world to see.

The long history of evolution of plant and animal varieties would seem to indicate that competition is one of god's chosen methods of developing novel and fruitful forms of life in his accelerating creativity. Why should it be different in the realm of spirit and religion? [*Possibilities*, p. 122]

Sir John was well aware that such a view might be objectionable to those who consider the Bible to be the exclusive source of wisdom, but he suggested an alternate view of divine revelation:

Christians think god appeared in Jesus of Nazareth two thousand years ago for our salvation and education. But should we take it to mean that education and progress stopped there, that Jesus was the end of change, the end of time? Is such a notion compatible with the divine, free, open, creative nature of the universe? To say that god cannot reveal himself in a decisive way again, because he did it once centuries ago, can seem sacrilegious. [*Possibilities*, p. 38]

Sir John believed that a dynamic and evolutionary approach to religion could engage the minds of skeptics and help them to find meaning and purpose in older traditions.

Could young people and intellectuals be attracted to forms of religion that are genuinely dynamic and rapidly progressing? Does this mean that the old ways have to be discarded totally? I hope not, because it is clear that much of the strength of religion is in the precious core of wisdom and truth that it transmits from each generation to the next. So opening up a few religious



communities to new concepts and new adventures of spiritual learning should not be like a revolution which attempts to build the new upon the ashes of the old. [*Possibilities*, p. 9]

Turning from religion to theology, Sir John discerned a similar state of affairs:

Theology was once considered as queen of the sciences. It may someday regain that title; but first we may have to learn how to learn in order to regain that title. [*Possibilities*, p. 10]

An age of experimental theology may be beginning. This term is used to indicate efforts to gain understanding of the power of spiritual practices by concentrating on observable data resulting from spiritual experiences. Will following this approach open up religious concepts to rigorous empirical scrutiny? This should be an appealing notion even for skeptics. [*Possibilities*, p. 104]

Radicals and Heretics

As an investment manager, Sir John achieved spectacular success by following a simple rule: buy when others are selling (which requires the discipline to seek deep, hidden value), and sell when others are buying. Through this contrarian approach, he was able to create the assets that now endow the John Templeton Foundation. In religion as well, Sir John observed that success has often flowed to those who were regarded in their own day as unorthodox, radical, or even heretical:

Throughout history has religion developed and progressed often by the work of those who were first regarded as heretics? [*Possibilities*, p. 42]

Beneficial originators in other great religions also were often called heretics. Abraham and Moses were considered heretics by neighboring tribes in their age. [*Possibilities*, p. 38]

Rarely does a historian or conservative become a hero of later history. Many of history's most creative people have been unconventional, far-reaching thinkers who seek to improve accepted customs of their time. Often such people have been called radicals. [*Possibilities*, p. 42]

Spiritual Laws

Sir John believed that the laws of nature are not the only laws that influence and guide human behavior:

Now, if there are laws of nature that appear to be expressions of the character or being of physical objects in the creation, would it not be reasonable to expect that there can be analogous laws of the spirit that are expressions of the character of spiritual realities? [*Possibilities*, p. 154]

Drawing a contrast and comparison with the laws of physics, Sir John explained:

The laws of the spirit refer to patterns of voluntary human behavior, not to the involuntary behavior of physical objects. A person is free to choose to act in accord with these spiritual laws or to try to defy them. This being the case, the patterns which these laws express are not uniformly exhibited by humans at all times. Rather, they represent the ideal patterns to which humans may aspire.

Conformity to the laws of the spirit is a free choice of all responsible humans. So perhaps, to avoid misunderstandings, we should call them spiritual principles. [*Possibilities*, p. 154]

Thus, Sir John proposed that the laws of the spirit, like the laws of physics, could also be subjected to systematic scientific research:

It is my belief that the basic laws or principles for leading a “sublime life,” to paraphrase Longfellow, can be examined and tested just as science examines and tests natural laws of the universe. [*Wisdom*, p. xxi]

By continually and carefully researching spiritual principles, can humanity reap substantial benefits, both for the individual and for human society at large? Can this point to challenging opportunities for beneficial researches by scientists and theologians? [*Possibilities*, p. 155]

Can researchers discover what personalities are achieving heaven while on earth? Who can devise tests to discover which are the happier people and why? [*Possibilities*, p. 134]

The John Templeton Foundation also welcomes proposals . . . to verify or falsify any one or more of these two hundred proposed eternal principles, or others not included in this book. The purpose is to continually improve these studies in a way readily acceptable worldwide! [*Laws of Life*, p. xxi]

Dialogue between Science and Religion

A centerpiece of Sir John's vision of the future was the prospect of an informed, far-reaching dialogue between science and religion:

Does the present offer theology a greatly expanded vision of the cosmos and of historical process and potentiality? Most excitingly, is an important challenge for theology opened up on the possibility of spiritual progress? How can theologians and religious communities research ways to develop real and beneficial aspects of spiritual progress? [*Possibilities*, p. 99]

Does the possibility of additional spiritual information depend upon scientists humble enough to admit that the unseen is vastly greater than the seen and upon theologians humble enough to admit that some older concepts of god may need to grow? Both hopefully can develop a vastly larger cosmology and wider, deeper theology, especially by working in creative dialogue. [*Possibilities*, p. 104]

A New Vocabulary for Spiritual Discourse

A productive dialogue between science and religion may require the development of a new vocabulary to facilitate communication among all parties concerned. Sir John called attention to this need:

Could discovery be accelerated if we find words with greater clarity to be used in place of some old words that instantly arouse prejudices in the minds of many great intellects? If the word theology is used mainly by those who study biblical concepts, could another word be found to show that discoveries of all sciences may be, in reality, discoveries of infinite intellect?

In the minds of some scientists and other intellectuals, do the words infinite intellect arouse fewer unconscious prejudices than the ancient word god which has been so different in various civilizations? Can the word revelation come to mean not only god revealing himself but also humans diligently

discovering more of infinite intellect? [*Possibilities*, p. 151]

Leadership by the Best Minds

Sir John expected those with exceptional cognitive talents to play a special role in humanity's search for new ideas:

Perhaps only about one child in a million is born with talents which seem almost superhuman in one or more ways. Why does god's process of evolution produce these rare geniuses on earth? Is it the divine plan that they should help all people to progress?

The one in a million who contributes a new idea to humanity can be a blessing to billions, which helps god's creation continue to progress. [*Possibilities*, p. 43]

There is also a special role for those with exceptional spiritual gifts:

In addition to the geniuses given more-than-human minds, god also creates saints and prophets gifted with more-than-human souls. A prophet is a pioneer in the vast uncharted regions of the spirit. For spiritual progress to flourish, do we need to cultivate interest and humility to listen carefully and learn from such people, recognizing their important gifts? [*Possibilities*, pp. 43-44]

Sir John therefore urged strong support for those exceptional people who will lead the search for new spiritual information:

A major aim of the Templeton Foundation is to help those relatively rare and visionary entrepreneurs who are trying to encourage all religions to become enthusiastic about the concepts of spiritual progress and new spiritual information, especially by linking with scientific methods and lines of inquiry.

If benefits from this approach can be practically demonstrated, then it may be welcomed and can help to reinvigorate appreciation for and to supplement the wonderful ancient scriptures which stand at the core of most religious cultures. [*Possibilities*, p. 11]

Benefits for All of Humanity

Sir John acknowledged that there was no consensus about the nature or possibility of spiritual laws:

When any field of research is begun, no one can possibly predict what may eventually be discovered. Astronomers before Copernicus could not have predicted or even imagined the galaxies or supernovas or pulsars that we are now aware of. In the same way, no one can yet say what laws of the spirit will be formulated and eventually verified. [*Possibilities*, p. 158]

But he was impressed by the many contributions to spiritual understanding already furnished by the world's great religious traditions, especially concerning the power of love:

Maybe we will discover that love is indeed the basic force in the spiritual world. Could Dante have been correct when he said, "It is love which moves the sun and stars"? Can both theologians and scientists be enthusiastic to convince skeptics by many various experiments and by collecting many statistics to test repeatedly worldwide many such spiritual laws? [*Possibilities*, p. 163]

Indeed, Sir John believed that the power of love might well hold the key to advances in human spiritual and material welfare:

Bestowing technology and know-how on people in poor nations is a blessing; but the lasting blessing may be people who can radiate love and joy as they research and teach the basic spiritual realities, which then lead to progress, improved skills, spiritual wealth, and also material prosperity. Who can devise additional scientific or statistical research to test these concepts? [*Possibilities*, p. 129]

Conclusion

Sir John Templeton wanted his philanthropy to reach scientists, theologians, and opinion leaders, but his ultimate audience was all of humankind. He hoped to help every man and woman to acquire a passion for humble discovery, including discovery about God and God's purposes.

Sir John's aim was to liberate and empower the human mind, to encourage people to overcome

their passivity and fatalism and to ask probing questions about life and existence. Humility and open-mindedness provided the surest path, he believed, to both material and spiritual progress.

In the face of God's creation, Sir John was consumed by a deep and abiding gratitude. Each new discovery reinforced this sense of gratitude and provided, in Sir John's view, evidence of both God's love for humankind and His call to each of us to join a process of continuous creativity.