

# 'Spiritual Realities' in Service of Science and Vice Versa

When the Templeton Foundation gave its annual prize, now valued at \$1.5 million, to the philosopher Charles Taylor, it probably did itself an even greater service than it did the honoree.

And in a simple, almost unnoticed phrase at a news conference on Wednesday when the award was announced, Professor Taylor inadvertently suggested why.

## BELIEFS

PETER STEINFELS

His remarks were impromptu, although the news media packet for the event contained a prepared formal statement. He began, of course, by expressing his sense of being surprised and overwhelmed by the prize, which used to be given for "progress in religion" but since 2001 has been given for "progress toward research or discoveries about spiritual realities."

Professor Taylor immediately noted that the idea of "discovery" in spiritual matters was "an analogy to scientific discovery in chemistry, physics and so on." In answering a question later, he went further, worrying aloud that "the notion of discovery here by analogy with natural science a little bit falsifies the picture."

To many listening, this point about "analogy" might only have been a passing remark, but to a careful thinker like Professor Taylor, it was fundamental. And it showed why giving him the prize this year could be a breakthrough moment for the prize itself and the foundation that presents it.

Established in 1972 to fill what the wildly successful investor Sir John Templeton considered a lacuna in the Nobel Prizes, the Templeton Prize has always been haunted by the appearance of a naïve literalism that basically accepted the natural sciences as the modern gold standard for real knowledge and wanted to put religion on an equal footing, which is why Sir John always insisted that the cash award top the most remunerative Nobel.

Yet the very idea of a prize for "progress" in religion always seemed strange. Surely, some recipients like Mother Teresa might qualify as modern saints, and others certainly qualified as major thinkers. But was this somehow "progress" over Siddhartha Gautama, Francis of Assisi, Thomas Aquinas or Moses Maimonides?

The Templeton Foundation, founded in 1987 to administer the prize along with a growing array of other programs, has become much more sophisticated in recent years. But in some circles that has only increased, not diminished, suspicions that it wants to harness the cultural prestige

of hard science in questionable ways to promote religion.

The ambiguity remains, and the rewording of the annual prize to honor not religion per se, but "discoveries about spiritual matters," doesn't really help.

In choosing Professor Taylor, however, the foundation consciously singled out someone who has long argued for the need to distinguish methodologies appropriate to the social or human sciences from those appropriate to the natural sciences.

His first book, published in 1964, was a critique of psychological behaviorism for trying to understand humans while bracketing their internal

---

## *An award, its latest recipient and the 'notion of discovery.'*

---

sense of self, their intentions and their subjectivity.

He extended that critique to other approaches in philosophy or the social sciences that modeled themselves on natural science. He insisted that to study humans, unlike planets or sea slugs, one had to take seriously the human drive for self-understanding, identity, meaning and purpose, articulated in language, ritual, habitual practices, social interactions and personal and cultural narratives.

It is this effort to propose an alternative to what has been called scientism that has now projected Professor Taylor as a defender of the spiritual and of spirituality. Strictly speaking, the projection is not inaccurate.

"We have somehow to break down the barriers between our contemporary culture of science and disciplined academic study" and "the domain of spirit," he said in the statement on Wednesday.

Unfortunately, "spiritual" and "spirituality" are now terms so badly tarnished by association with pop psychology and comfort food for the soul that they do little to convey the body of thought that Professor Taylor has produced.

It includes highly technical philosophical jousting about language and knowledge, as well as political theory, analyses of multiculturalism and, in

"Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity" (1989), a large-scale account of how post-Reformation Europe reconfigured a new understanding of the self around calling and family, the ordinary life of productive activity and intimate relationship. Journalists, including this one, should be forgiven for not managing to encompass in brief articles such a range of work drawing as freely on history, sociology and anthropology as on philosophy. Even Professor Taylor's brief "reflections" on 12 of his major books passed out at the news conference did not do justice to the complexities and subtleties of his thinking.

In addition, "A Secular Age," Professor Taylor's weighty (in every sense) account of modern secularization will appear from the Harvard University Press only next fall. This book will be the third but central volume developed from the prestigious Gifford Lectures that he delivered in 1999 in Edinburgh. Some journalists, especially in Canada, have tagged Professor Taylor, who was born in Montreal, a "bridge builder," the bilingual offspring of a French-Canadian mother and an Anglo-Canadian father. That fact — "It had a profound influence on me," he has said — certainly explains his deep appreciation of cultural diversity and of finding ways to prevent conflicts of identity from exploding into violence.

Intellectually, he has been a bridge builder in other ways, between academic disciplines, between his Roman Catholic faith and the values of the Enlightenment, between the universal claims that can be made about all humans and the recognition of profound changes that are owed to particular histories.

It is not surprising that Professor Taylor was recently named co-chairman of a commission to examine accommodating cultural and religious differences in the public life of Quebec. And on Wednesday, he voiced alarm at "creeping Islamophobia."

His political engagements are nothing new, of course. In the 1960s, he ran four times for the Canadian Parliament, coming closest in 1965, when he was narrowly defeated by the future prime minister Pierre Trudeau. After one more effort, in 1968, Professor Taylor devoted himself to philosophy.

Seldom have voters made such a valuable contribution to the world of thought and, in the fullest sense of the word, of spirit.