

Behind the creationism controversy at Britain's Royal Society

Paul Mitchell
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Last month, the Royal Society's education director, Professor Michael Reiss, was forced to resign for advocating, at the very least, the teaching of creationism alongside evolution in school science classes.

The controversy arose after Reiss, a well-known educationalist and practicing priest, gave a lecture at the British Association for the Advancement of Science's summer Festival of Science entitled, "Should creationism be a part of the science curriculum?" He told the audience, "Creationism is best seen by science teachers not as a misconception but as a world view."

The *Times* headlined its story, "Leading scientist urges teaching of creationism in schools," and began, "Creationism should be taught in science classes as a legitimate point of view, according to the Royal Society..."

Not unexpectedly, the notion that the prestigious Royal Society of London for the Improvement of Natural Knowledge—founded in 1660 since when it has functioned as the British academy of sciences—was promoting creationism provoked the anger of many of its leading members.

Nobel Prize winners Richard Roberts, John Sulston and Harry Kroto wrote to the society's president, Martin Rees, demanding "that Professor Reiss step down, or be asked to step down, as soon as possible".

"We gather Professor Reiss is a clergyman, which in itself is very worrisome," the letter said.

"Who on earth thought that he would be an appropriate Director of Education, who could be expected to answer questions about the differences between science and religion in a scientific, reasoned way?"

Kroto said he had written to Rees soon after Reiss's appointment saying it was "extremely disturbing".

"There is no way that an ordained minister—for whom unverified dogma must represent a major, if not the major, pillar in their lives—can present free-thinking, doubt-based scientific philosophy honestly or disinterestedly," he explained.

"The thing the Royal Society does not appreciate is the true nature of the forces arrayed against it and the Enlightenment for which the Royal Society should be the last champion," Kroto added.

Within days, the Royal Society announced Reiss's resignation. Its September 16 statement said that Reiss's comments were "open to misinterpretation" and that "while it was not his intention, this has led to damage to the Society's reputation"; he would "step

down" as Director of Education and return to his position as Professor of Science Education at the Institute of Education. It added, "The Royal Society's position is that creationism has no scientific basis and should not be part of the science curriculum. However, if a young person raises creationism in a science class, teachers should be in a position to explain why evolution is a sound scientific theory and why creationism is not, in any way, scientific."

The fact that Reiss is a priest and an advocate of the "science and religion debate"—which seeks to bridge the chasm between the scientific method and religious beliefs—should have sounded the alarm bells to the Royal Society before it appointed him to the new position in September 2006.

Reiss claims that he is opposed to the teaching of creationism in science classes and is simply advising teachers how to deal with the subject if it comes up in discussion. If so, then many will rightly question why he has spent such an inordinate amount of time on the "science-religion debate" since he was appointed. Reiss has produced a number of articles, interviews and lectures in the two years he has been at the organisation. He has also managed to squeeze in the publication of, "Teaching about Scientific Origins: Taking Account of Creationism" in 2007, draft "Should science educators deal with the science/religion issue?" and "Imagining the world: the significance of religious worldviews for science education."

The more you look into Reiss and the "science-religion debate" the more you see the all-pervasive hand of the Templeton Foundation, set up by recently deceased billionaire John Marks Templeton. It has helped to develop an intellectual atmosphere where the Royal Society had no qualms about appointing Reiss.

Templeton made his fortune from investing in ailing nations, industries, and companies at what he called "points of maximum pessimism."

He asserted that religion had lost its authority in the twentieth century and looked to "scientific revelations" as the "gold mine for revitalizing religion in the twenty-first century." To rectify this situation he set about using his wealth to that end—endowing the Foundation with approximately \$1.5 billion—sufficient to provide some \$70 million in annual grants.

He established the Templeton Prize for Progress toward Research or Discoveries about Spiritual Realities, dedicated to those "trying various ways for discoveries and breakthroughs to expand human perceptions of divinity and to help in the

acceleration of divine creativity."

The approximately £800,000 (\$1.5 million) prize money exceeds that of the Nobel Prizes and is the largest single annual financial prize given to an individual.

Making clear the relationship between his religious proselytising and his defence of wealth and privilege, Templeton provided enough cash to transform the Centre for Management Studies into a full college—Templeton College—at the University of Oxford to help promote free market ideology. He also set up the lucrative Templeton-Cambridge Journalism Fellowships in Science and Religion to give cash-strapped journalists, "an opportunity to examine the dynamic and creative interface between science and religion".

In its early days the Templeton Foundation funded a number of projects and people in the "intelligent design" (ID) creationism movement. The foundation sought to distance itself from the more extreme fundamentalist elements, particularly after US District Judge John E. Jones ruled that ID was religion and not science in the high-profile school board legal test case in Dover, Pennsylvania in 2005. Parents at the school had complained about the board's imposition of ID teaching in biology classes.

The first time that the Royal Society appears to have been openly involved with the Templeton Foundation was its acceptance of nearly \$300,000 in 2004 in support of lectures on "the nature of human knowledge and understanding" by a series of academics associated with the Templeton project. Most prominent were:

* George F. R. Ellis, a mathematics professor at the University of Cape Town, who is considered one of the world's leading theorists in cosmology. He is currently President of the International Society for Science and Religion and winner of the Templeton Prize in 2004. Ellis praised the Foundation for reinvigorating the "science and religion debate" and for getting it recognised as an academic subject in many universities and colleges. He said, "The way in which science and religion by and large complement each other is becoming ever clearer, as are the natures of the various points of tension between them, and some possible resolutions of those tensions."

* Professor Martin Nowak, Director, Program for Evolutionary Dynamics, Harvard University. Nowak sits on the Foundation's Board of Advisers and is co-director of the Evolution and Theology of Cooperation research project at Harvard sponsored by the Templeton Foundation. In a lecture given at Harvard in March 2007 called "Evolution and Christianity," he argued that "science and religion are two essential components in the search for truth. Denying either is a barren approach."

* Reverend Dr. John Polkinghorne, former president, Queen's College, Cambridge and Canon Theologian of Liverpool Cathedral and 2002 Templeton Prize winner. He is a leading proponent of critical realism, which aims to show that the language of science and Christian theology are similar, allowing for dialogue between the two.

* Ziauddin Sardar, the Professor of Postcolonial Studies at City University, London and regular columnist for the *Observer* and the *New Statesman*. He delivered a lecture at the Royal Society saying, "science matters because it is vital for the recovery and survival of Islam itself." He concluded, "Thus, the revival of science and a

reform agenda for Islam in Muslim society need to proceed hand in hand."

During 2007, the foundation sponsored a conference on the new "multiverse" or parallel universe scientific theory, featuring a contribution from the Royal Society's President Rees and cosmologist Bernard Carr, professor of mathematics and astronomy at Queen Mary, University of London. Carr has received a grant from the Foundation for a project entitled, "Fundamental Physics and the Problem of our Existence", and is the editor of a book based on a series of conferences funded by the Foundation, entitled "Universe or Multiverse?"

The Templeton Foundation has also pumped millions into other organisations and projects such as the Metanexus Institute, formally named the Metanexus Institute on Religion and Science. Its web site says, "Metanexus affirms that a long and evolving Earth and Cosmic history is a well-established fact of science, but that the interpretation of this natural history, how it happens and what it means, is open to diverse points of views."

Reiss has reviewed several books for *Global Spiral*, including one in 2006 titled, "Science and Religion in Schools: A Guide to the Issues for Primary Schools" by Brooke and Rogers in which he says, "There is no shortage of books on science and religion but, perhaps surprisingly, there is a paucity of materials that are of high quality and can be used in schools. Until the Science and Religion in Schools Project, that is. This initiative, supported by a grant from the John Templeton Foundation, has painstakingly produced these exceptionally good resources."

"For myself, I am delighted these publications have seen the light of day. They are sensitive to current English and Welsh National Curriculum and Examination requirements [which Reiss helped design as a member of the Labour government's Qualifications and Curriculum Authority] but are not beholden to them and are eminently suitable for use in any English-speaking context. I cannot recommend them too highly. Even if you do not teach in a school, I suspect you will gain much from them," he added.

That a priest could be appointed to such an influential position in one of the world's most prestigious scientific institutions is a sign of an intellectual climate corrupted by power and wealth. One (very rich) man's backwardness and personal influence on the intellectual climate must be replaced by one of democratic control of research funding. The rise of charities like the Templeton Foundation was facilitated by the Labour government's slashing of basic research funding, enabling them to fill the void and through faith schools and academies that seriously undermine the opportunity for children to be educated in adequately funded comprehensive schools free from religious sectarianism and indoctrination.



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