

TEMPLETON RESEARCH LECTURES

The Templeton Research Lectures promote interdisciplinary dialogue, supporting scholars to pursue broad questions far beyond the narrow confines of their academic specialties. By opening up intellectual “space” in the academy, the Templeton Lectures build bridges between the humanities and the sciences, between science and religion, between conversation partners who should, but often don’t, talk to each other.

It’s a Friday afternoon in sunny Santa Barbara. Blue skies, ocean and nearby beaches beckon people outside. But at the University of California in Santa Barbara (UCSB) a standing-room crowd has gathered to hear physicist Walter Kohn talk about science and religion.

Born in Vienna, Austria, in 1923, Walter Kohn was raised as a Jew. His parents were killed by the Nazis, but Walter escaped to England in 1940, was deported to Canada and spent the rest of WWII in various Allied prison camps. After the war he pursued physics at Harvard, later winning the Nobel Prize in Chemistry for showing how atoms in molecules bind to each other. Kohn’s 2001 lecture at Santa Barbara and its East Coast counterpart at Columbia University inaugurated the Templeton Research Lectures. Since then the lectures have been hosted by a number of other major universities: Stanford, Bar Ilan, University of Montreal, University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA).

The interdisciplinary lectures are designed to restore and promote the interaction of science and religion. By bringing insights of science to questions of meaning and spirituality, the lectures help bring coherence to a new interdisciplinary field. “Academics have made enormous progress through specialization over the last century,” says Billy Grassie, who administers the program. “But now we have reached a situation where we are perhaps too specialized. We are too wedded to our departmental boundaries, narrowing subdisciplines, and their respective guilds.”

Specialization in the academy has made it hard for academics from different disciplines to even talk to each other, much less work together. Noah Efron, who hosted the lectures at Bar Ilan University in Tel Aviv, Israel, laments “All of us concerned about science and religion bemoan the fact that discussion usually stops at the border of our own particular discipline.” Efron’s counterpart at Columbia University, Robert Pollack, shares his concern:

“As the pace of scientific discovery and technological innovation accelerates, there is an urgent need to reflect thoughtfully about these epic changes and challenges in a constructive dialogue involving the humanistic disciplines and the world’s religious traditions.”

The challenge is the mismatch between our most pressing problems and our most effective tools. As Grassie says, “The intellectual landscape of today simply does not fit into the disciplines. The Templeton Lectures address this crisis in the life of the academe by promoting interdisciplinary research groups and distinguished lectureships.”

The Foundation originated the initiative in the late 1990s. Sir John’s vision was to spotlight ideas of thinkers who bring science and spirituality together in an open and humble way, to avoid the dogmas of religion. “Religion should be forward-looking and should admit that no human being has ever known one percent of the infinity of God,” says Sir John, adding: “Most religious people have felt that they knew it all already and that anybody who disagreed with them was wrong. Science is open-ended. Scientists do argue with each other about which one is right, but still, almost every scientist will agree that they know so little and they need to learn.”

The Templeton Research Lectures are modeled after the Gifford Lectures, delivered annually at four universities in Scotland. After decades of relative anonymity, the “Giffords” are now considered to be the most prestigious academic lecture series in the world. Some of the most important and influential ideas of the 20th

century were Gifford Lectures. William James's classic *The Varieties of Religious Experience* was based on his Giffords. Alfred North Whitehead's *Process and Reality* that spawned the entire process theology movement was based on his 1927-28 lectures. More recently Templeton Prize laureates Freeman Dyson and Holmes Rolston delivered Gifford Lectures that have become important books.

"The spirit of the Gifford Lectures is refracted in the Templeton Lectures through Sir John's lens, which reflects a broad and generous view of religion coupled with an admiring view of scientific progress," says Robert Pollack.

Providing support for up to four years to develop interdisciplinary studies, the program brings a distinguished scholar to a university for sustained interaction, with time to develop a new book. The hope is that the lecture series will create new ideas not possible in the more conventional and constrained university system. In so doing, says Grassie, "We hope to put questions about the universe and the universal back at the heart of the modern university."