

THE HUMBLE APPROACH INITIATIVE

The symposia are part of the Foundation's Humble Approach initiative. The goal of the initiative is to bring about the discovery of new spiritual information by furthering high-quality scientific research. The “humble approach” is inherently interdisciplinary, sensitive to nuance, and biased in favor of building linkages and connections. It assumes an openness to new ideas and a willingness to experiment. Placing high value upon patience and perseverance, it retains a sense of wondering expectation because it recognizes, in Loren Eiseley's haunting phrase, “a constant emergent novelty in nature that does not lie totally behind us, or we would not be where we are.” A fundamental principle of the Foundation, in the words of its founder, is that “humility is a gateway to greater understanding and open[s] the doors to progress” in all endeavors. Sir John Templeton believes that in their quest to comprehend ultimate reality, scientists, philosophers, and theologians have much to learn about and from one another. The humble approach is intended as a corrective to parochialism. It encourages discovery and seeks to accelerate its pace.

Sit down before fact as a little child,” said Thomas Huxley, “be prepared to give up every preconceived notion, follow humbly wherever nature leads, or you will learn nothing.” Huxley’s insight about the role of humility in the search for knowledge is shared by all great thinkers who know firsthand that the immediate prerequisite to learning is humble admission of ignorance. “It is impossible,” said Epictetus, the philosopher/slave from the second century, “for a man to learn what he thinks he already knows.” More recently Sir John Templeton has called humility “a gateway to greater understanding that opens the doors to progress.”

Humility and progress are two words often on the lips of Sir John; they are also the twin lights that mark the path sought by the foundation that bears his name. And they are profoundly related to one another. A special program called the Humble Approach initiative lies at the heart of the Foundation. Serving as a precursor for much larger programs, with multimillion-dollar budgets spread over several years, it is the seed from which great projects grow.

The rapid scientific progress of the last four centuries has been relentlessly reductionist, taking nature apart and looking for explanations at the smallest level of reality. But there are important phenomena that simply disappear when examined too closely. Life for example is strangely absent at the level of protons and electrons. Yet who would deny its reality? And mind is strangely absent at the level of genes, but we cannot deny its reality either.

There are many scholars who, enamored with the remarkable success of reductionism, do deny the reality of higher-level concepts like life and mind, dismissing them as superficial epiphenomena, to be “reduced” to their more mechanical components. What are most fully “real” are the particles and laws of physics. Thus some scientists speak of human beings as “lumbering robots,” controlled by selfish genes; call the brain a “computer made of meat”; or write, “The more the universe is comprehensible, the more it seems pointless.” These assertions presume we know much more than we do. But we should not reject such claims, for they are all made by informed thinkers whose insights are of genuine value. We can however ask if such claims might not be incomplete.

Such certitudes have a religious ring to them and indeed critics have charged that such viewpoints are the foundations of the religion of scientific materialism. Parochial dogmatism, most often associated with religion, can also afflict science.

The Foundation’s Humble Approach initiative is based on the growing intuition that an aggressive scientific reductionism may not be the best approach for all scientific problems. Science has progressed rapidly by specializing, and each discipline now has a narrow set of tools and paradigms that work very well on the narrow range of problems that lie within each discipline. But what if there are important scientific problems that are too complex, subtle, or wide-ranging to be solved within a single discipline? The Humble Approach

initiative is thus intentionally interdisciplinary, biased in favor of linkages, connections and nuance. The approach counters narrow parochialism and opens the door to new possibilities.

The Humble Approach initiative gathers leading scholars—scientists, theologians and others—to consider a deep and critical question. The various disciplinary lights focused on the problem illuminate it in highly original ways, creating the possibility that something new will come into view. Previous meetings have included the following:

- A symposium on contemporary glosses on panentheism, those clusters of ideas associated with the belief that God includes and penetrates the whole universe so that every part exists in him yet his being is more than the universe, chaired by Philip Clayton and Arthur Peacocke in 2001. It considered what general frameworks for conceiving of the God-world relation may be consistent both with biblical data and modern philosophical and scientific contexts at a gathering of leading scholars from disparate disciplines in St. George's House within the walls of Windsor Castle.
- Hints from quantum theory that reality might be more holistic than classical physics suggested was the basis of a meeting held in 2002 on the northern shore of Lake Geneva, Switzerland. Led by French astrophysicist Bruno Guiderdoni, scholars considered the startling possibility that ultimate reality might be an undivided whole, as has long been believed by Eastern religious traditions.

The director of the Humble Approach initiative is Mary Ann Meyers, Ph.D., the Senior Fellow at the Foundation, who formerly taught courses on religion in America at Haverford College and the University of Pennsylvania and is the author of a number of books. Meyers sees the Humble Approach initiative as a response to Loren Eiseley's observation of "a constant emergent novelty in nature that does not lie totally behind us." That emergent novelty is best explored by being open to radically different ways of seeing the world, ways that often require finding hidden connections between the disciplines. And this requires getting scholars from very different backgrounds to listen carefully to each other.

"The Humble Approach symposia are interdisciplinary and sensitive to nuance in the research from fields ranging from theology to philosophy to biology to physics as well as several of the social sciences," says Meyers. It assumes participants are open to new ideas and want to experiment.

"By working together across traditional boundaries," says Meyers, "it really is possible to garner important new insights." But scholars don't naturally do this. "In both science and theology, or, indeed, any discipline, it's not unusual to talk only to one's colleagues." The symposia that Meyers organizes enable participants to get into "cross-boundary conversations that challenge one to think in new and different ways about old questions and even ask questions that no one has thought to pose before."

Humble Approach initiatives begin by identifying important topics that might benefit from a cross-disciplinary approach. Meyers pays special attention to finding the key scholar who can bring it all together. "It's a crucial decision," says Meyers, "because the chair or chairs need to grasp both the scientific and the theological implications of the subject at hand." The participants who are selected prepare papers that everyone reads in advance and then meet for two very intense days of conversation. Meyers describes the symposia as "launching pads for further exploration."

"It is always our expectation that with a lot of hard post-symposia work, a book will emerge that is widely useful both to professionals in various fields and general readers," says Meyers.

The Humble Approach initiative began in the fall of 1998 with a symposium at Queens' College, Cambridge, exploring a kenotic view of creation—a perspective concerned with divine 'self-limitation' and 'self-emptying'—and its implications for Christian doctrine and the scientific enterprise. Queens' also was the site of the first 2004 symposium, on spiritual healing and the evidence for its existence. Other symposia have looked at how the discovery of life beyond the boundaries of Earth might impact the perceptions people have of themselves and their place in the universe (1998); the emergence of organized complexity (1999); the future of life in the cosmos and the far future of the universe itself (2000); the possible link between religiosity and human health (1999); how human concepts of God are changing in light of the modernization of traditional

cultures, the secularization of society, and the discoveries of contemporary science (2000); purpose in biological and cultural evolution (2000); the impact of advances in the neurosciences upon religious beliefs (2001); the possibility of a multiplicity of possible or actual universes and the deep scientific, philosophical, and theological questions raised by this ancient idea, which is enjoying a new lease on life (2003); and more.

Despite the large number of symposia held to date, Meyers has no concerns that the need for such creative gatherings is in any way diminished. “There is a nearly inexhaustible number of deep and difficult questions,” she notes, adding, “New discoveries in science and new insights in theology can help us examine these questions with greater hope of illumination.”