

likely to go further in explaining human moral impulses than some religious people will welcome. Thus it shares a degree of suspicion with many in the scientific community at any attempt by religiously driven organizations to fund science. A chief concern is that the influential Templeton Foundation might be seeking to inject religion into the scientific world. And it is easy to understand that concern given the political activism of many American fundamentalists and their efforts to promote ideas such as intelligent design, which posits a divine hand in evolution. The foundation's most vigorous critics accuse it of attempting to lace science with spiritualism.

That claim is somewhat ironic, as Templeton himself seemed to have just the opposite in mind. He believed institutional religion to be antiquated, and hoped a dialogue with researchers might bring about advances in theological thinking. The foundation's substantial funding of science and religion departments around the world is directed towards those ends. Theologians have also used foundation money to develop and promote arguments that reconcile some of the apparent contradictions between science and religion. For those many scientists with a faith, promoting the compatibility of science with faith is a prudent and even necessary goal. Strict atheists may deplore such activities, but they can happily ignore them too.

The foundation's scientific agenda addresses 'big questions', which has sometimes resulted in work that many researchers regard as

scientifically marginal. One field popular with the foundation is positive psychology, which seeks to gauge the effects of positive thinking on patients, and which critics argue has yielded little. Also heavily supported are cosmological studies into the existence of multiple universes — a notion frequently criticized for lying at the edge of falsifiability. The concern is that such research has been unduly elevated by the foundation's backing. But whatever one thinks of positive psychology and the like, the foundation's support has not taken anything away from conventional funding. And in the field of cosmology at least, it has arguably yielded some new and interesting ideas.

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The foundation's management now falls chiefly to Templeton's son, John M. Templeton Jr, whose Christian beliefs are reportedly much more conventional than his father's. A critical scrutiny of the foundation's scientific influence continues to be warranted, and no scientific organization should accept sums of money so large that its mission could be perceived as being swayed by religious or spiritual considerations. But critics' total opposition to the Templeton Foundation's unusual mix of science and spirituality is unwarranted. ■

An uneasy peace

Britain's 'big science' funding agency is now in a position to regain much-needed credibility.

Last week, an official opened a meeting between scientists and the UK Science and Technology Facilities Council (STFC) by asking that those present leave their weapons at the front desk.

The joke, which met with anaemic laughter, shows how bad things have been between the council, whose responsibilities include high-energy physics and astronomy, and the scientists it serves. In December, the council announced that it had an £80-million (US\$160-million) spending shortfall in its latest budget, which runs until 2011. Council officials laid out preliminary plans to withdraw from such key projects as the International Linear Collider, a next-generation particle accelerator, and the Gemini Observatory, a pair of 8-metre telescopes located in Hawaii and Chile. Many were furious over the cuts, which came with no consultation.

Gallows humour aside, last week's meeting showed that the STFC has gone some considerable way towards repairing its relationship with the community. Resentment remains, especially towards Keith Mason, the council's sometimes truculent chief executive. But by and large, the researchers who depend on the STFC to back their work seem ready to accept a programme that includes some cuts. This transformation is thanks to the rapid formation of ten specialist advisory committees to help inform the final version of the STFC's budget.

Although the plan looks similar to the original package, important concessions have been made and priorities shifted in a way that has

ameliorated the community's initial rage. The final plan sets aside around £1 million for 'advanced detector work', similar to that being done in preparation for the linear collider. It also continues participation in the Gemini telescopes, although it will seek to sell half of Britain's observing time in the project. The plan also promises support to projects in other fields, such as nuclear and neutrino physics.

The truce between community and council comes just in time. Already the UK government is gearing up for its next budget review, and the STFC and its constituent physicists must be able to work in concert if they are to win a bigger slice of the cake in the next round. They must speak with a single voice to policy-makers about the broader value of their work, and they must be coherent about the consequences of lower funding levels.

Coming up with a consistent message will not be easy. The STFC supports many disciplines. Yet at last week's meeting there was a sense of common purpose. The message from both the crowd and the STFC was that their work and especially the people who do it provide an intellectual foundation on which the knowledge economy is built. That message should resonate reasonably well with the Treasury, which is seeking economic returns on its investment in science, and will ring more true to scientists than promises of spin-off technologies and business-government partnerships.

It is up to both sides to develop last week's germ of an idea into a full-blown campaign. The STFC can work with the community to communicate effectively to policy-makers, while researchers, through the newly formed advisory committees, must tell the council how their work fits with the broader goals of the STFC. A dialogue of this sort, sorely absent this past eight months, is essential if the funding shortfalls seen last winter are not to be repeated in the next spending cycle. ■