Big Questions About Templeton
How the Philanthropic Giant Legitimizes Faith Healing

On May 18, 2012, Christianity Today, the most influential magazine within evangelicalism, reported that there were “credible reports” that Christian evangelist Heidi Baker had healed the deaf and raised people from the dead, where she was working in Mozambique. Baker claimed that “100% of the deaf in the Chiure area” of the country had “been healed through prayer.” In addition, Baker argued that “scores” of people had been resurrected and the blinded and disabled “restored.”

Such a report must have struck some Christianity Today readers as oddly out of place; the magazine has long been known for approaching the miraculous much more cautiously than competitors like Charisma, the leading magazine for Charismatic and Pentecostal believers. Yet Christianity Today’s coverage of Baker’s activities could not have been more credulous; the magazine valorized Baker’s missions and healing activities in Africa, stopping just short of declaring her an evangelical saint.

In the course of the article, two academics were quoted regarding Baker: Indiana University’s religious studies professor Candy Gunther Brown and Michael McClymond, a theology professor at St. Louis University. Both academics were quite flattering in their description of Baker. For example, Brown commented that “Heidi is a hero to young women,” so much so that scholars joke about ‘Heidiolatry.’ Indeed, Brown had been so intrigued by Baker’s claims that she “sought to verify them scientifically.” Thus Brown and a small team traveled to Mozambique and tested 24 Mozambicans “before and after healing prayer.” Brown found “statistically significant improvements in hearing and vision”—an astounding claim, given that previous studies concerning the efficacy of prayer have reported mixed results at best.

The lion’s share of Brown’s funding came from the John Templeton Foundation’s Flame of Love Project, which contributed $150,000 dollars to her research. The Templeton Foundation was founded by billionaire Sir John Templeton, who made his fortune in mutual funds. Templeton had a keen interest in religion, his own beliefs an eclectic union of Presbyterianism, New Thought, and Eastern influences; he borrowed from sources ranging from Norman Vincent Peale to Ramakrishna. Many of the traditions Templeton drew from emphasize spiritual exploration, “mind over matter” ideology, and positive thinking. Today, the $3.34 billion-endowed John Templeton Foundation awards some $100 million in grants yearly to organizations and projects that study the intersection of religion and science.

Theology and Health, as well as a nearly $2.2 million grant awarded to the University of Pennsylvania for the establishment of a Positive Psychology Center, which afforded the Foundation the opportunity to exercise important influence over this emerging school of psychology.

In general, the Foundation has sought to create a rapprochement between science and religion—from healthcare to biology, positive psychology to theology.

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i. The Charismatic and Pentecostal movements are Christian theological traditions devoted to the belief in, and practice of, “gifts of the Spirit” in the modern Christian church, such as healing and speaking in tongues. Candy Gunther Brown, much referenced in this article, uses the lowercase term ‘pentecostal’ to refer to “both Pentecostals and second and third-wave Charismatics.” ‘Charismatic’ often refers to a kind of Pentecostal-lite, or alternately to the combined Charismatic and Pentecostal traditions (which is the sense in which I use the term here). As I have argued in The Failure of Evangelical Mental Health Care and in a forthcoming work on the New Apostolic Reformation, the idea that “classical” or traditional Pentecostals are more theologically and politically extreme than Second or Third Wave Charismatics collapses under any sustained historical scrutiny. (See John Weaver, The Failure of Evangelical Mental Health Care, [Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2015], 15-16 and Candy Gunther Brown, “Introduction: Pentecostalism and the Globalization of Illness and Healing,” in Global Pentecostal and Charismatic Healing, [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011], 14.)
While this goal has been heavily criticized by many scientists (for instance, prominent physicist Sean Carroll\textsuperscript{11}), the Foundation has made a major name for itself in academia, thanks in part to increasing competition for research funds among academics. This article seeks to trace the impact of the Templeton Foundation by exploring a slice of its influence on research into the Charismatic and Pentecostal movements.

THE TEMPLETON FOUNDATION

The origins of the Foundation can be traced to the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion, founded in 1972 and given “each year...to a living person who has shown extraordinary originality in advancing humankind’s understanding of God.”\textsuperscript{12} The Prize originally operated like a Nobel Prize for religion,\textsuperscript{13} though today it is as likely to be awarded to scientists as to theologians or other spiritual leaders.\textsuperscript{14} At the time that Templeton formed his Foundation in the mid-’80s, writes journalist Nathan Schneider, “conventional wisdom...held that religion would retreat as science secularized the world.”\textsuperscript{15} Templeton sought to forestall this decline. What allowed the Foundation’s religion and science agenda to take off, however, was Harvard planetary scientist Charles Harper’s 1996 decision to join the Foundation as its executive director. Harper took Templeton’s ideas and visionary speculations and shaped them “into a package of programs that could begin to look credible to the scientific community.”\textsuperscript{16}

Much ink has been spilled about the Templeton Foundation’s influence on research in the hard sciences. Zoologist and outspoken secular activist Richard Dawkins has quipped that the Templeton Prize is usually given “to a scientist who is prepared to say something nice about religion.”\textsuperscript{17} Jerry Coyne, a prominent American biologist, condemned Templeton’s mission as a “serious corruption of science” and warned of the “cronyism that has always infected Templeton,”\textsuperscript{18} particularly in relationship to its study of “Big Questions,” a somewhat vague field of inquiry centered on quandaries like the nature of free will, consciousness, and evil.\textsuperscript{19} Sean Carroll’s criticisms of Templeton are somewhat more measured; he does not think there is any hard evidence that “Templeton works in nefarious ways to influence the people it funds.” For Carroll, the problem isn’t that Templeton is anti-science, but rather that “their views on science are very wrong.”\textsuperscript{20} Quantum physicist Michael Brooks echoes these views in the New Scientist, contending that Templeton does a disservice not so much to science as to religion, by advancing a conception of religion so “striped-down, vague and wooly” that it “puts the new Templeton religion comfortably beyond assault from questioners.”\textsuperscript{21}

Within the hard sciences, a firm ideological line has developed between critics of the Foundation—many of whom are New Atheists—and supporters of the Foundation, which can sometimes lead to charges of partiality and anti-religious prejudice. Yet even Jeffrey Schloss, a Templeton trustee, has admitted that without the Foundation, there would “be a bit less accommodationist fluff that proposes integration [between religion and science] at the expense of rigor.”\textsuperscript{22}

While the Foundation’s influence on the hard sciences has often been the focus of criticism, the social science- and healthcare-related research in which it engages can be far more problematic. The more subjective nature of the social sciences—and, to a lesser extent, healthcare—may make these fields more vulnerable to pseudoscientific concepts and dubious methodologies.

The ready acceptance of pseudoscience undergirds Templeton’s “history of seeding fields of study almost from scratch,” as Nathan Schneider describes it.\textsuperscript{23} In the early 1990s, the Foundation began heavily funding the National Institute for Healthcare Research (NIHR), an organization established “to ‘objectively’ examine the role that religion and spirituality might play in physical and mental health.”\textsuperscript{24} At the time, hardly any medical schools offered courses on religion. But today, after two decades of Templeton-promoted research, three-quarters of U.S. medical schools utilize spirituality within their curricula.\textsuperscript{25} This development was facilitated by a combination of awards given to NIHR researchers; an NIHR-derived, multi-volume literature review of religion and health research; and numerous Templeton Foundation-funded programs concerning the intersection between science, religion, and medicine.\textsuperscript{26} And it is the NIHR’s research that helped pave the way for Christianity Today to claim there were scientifically “credible reports” of faith healing in Mozambique.

INTERCESSORY PRAYER AND THE STEPP STUDY

At a Templeton-sponsored conference in the mid-1990s, Margaret Poloma, a sociologist who studied Charismatic and Pentecostal religious movements, met bioethicist Stephen Post, who would go on to create the Institute for Research on Unlimited Love (IRUL).\textsuperscript{27} Poloma and Post soon became Templeton grantees themselves, and by 2007 both had become co-directors (along with two other academics) of the Flame of Love (FOL) Project,\textsuperscript{28} the goal of which was to establish “a new interdisciplinary field of study [called] Godly Love.”\textsuperscript{29} The exact parameters of the science of Godly love are rather unclear; even Anthea Butler, who has been involved with the Templeton Foundation’s Project on Global Pentecostalism,\textsuperscript{30} told Schneider that initially “nobody in the field could figure out what the hell [Poloma] was talking about.”\textsuperscript{31}

As defined by Poloma and her Templeton-sponsored colleagues, Godly love is “the dynamic interaction between divine and human love that enlivens and expands benevolence.” To put it simply, the key takeaway is that while neither God Himself nor His interactions with human beings are measurable phenomena, individuals’ perceptions of interactions between human beings and God can be measured.\textsuperscript{32}

The Flame of Love Project, which received an initial Templeton grant of more than $2.3 million,\textsuperscript{33} was a massive undertaking, funding ten academic books (by significant figures in their respective fields), scores of academic articles, conference presentations, and book chapters.\textsuperscript{34} Among these projects was Brown’s prayer research: the “Study of the Therapeutic Effects of Proximal Intercessory Prayer... on Auditory and Visual Impairments in Rural Mozambique,” known as the STEPP study for short. The study focused on Iris Ministries (now Iris Global), which Baker and her husband founded, along with the closely aligned Global Awakening ministry.\textsuperscript{35}

Brown’s STEPP project is a part of a long line of academic “prayer studies” con-
duced in recent years, not all of which have found prayer to have positive effects. Many of these studies sought to evaluate “distant healing” or “distant intentional—ity”—the act of praying for others often referred to as “intercessory prayer.”

As of 2005, three studies had been conducted on remote intercessory prayer’s effect on heart patients. Two of these studies concluded that the prayed-for group fared better than a control group. However, the third found no difference. Another study—a relatively well regarded, Templeton-funded $2.4 million project directed by Herbert Benson—studied 1,802 patients recovering from coronary artery bypass graft surgery and concluded that “distant prayer” had no effect. And, as Dr. Richard Sloan, a leading critic of prayer research, points out, researchers claiming benefits from prayer may have succeeded simply because they tested for so many different health benefits that simple random chance produced the positive results.37

If one were to accept the prayer studies’ premises and conclusions, one would still encounter other basic problems with conforming prayer-based research to the scientific method. How can researchers, for example, be sure that it is intercessory prayer performed by study participants that is helping, and not the prayers of concerned outsiders?

Candy Gunther Brown and her team sought to address some of these issues by looking at a more immediate form of prayer known as proximal intercessory prayer (PIP), which focuses on physical healing (primarily through laying-on of hands, per Charismatic tradition). Moreover, Brown argued that one must distinguish between PIP and other proximal healing techniques, such as “Therapeutic Touch,” since they had a “different healing mechanism.”38 Her study looked at the effect of “direct-contact prayer,” involving touch and the laying-on of hands, on subjects’ vision and hearing.39 Brown and her colleagues claim to have found “statistically significant” findings in visual and auditory improvements across the tested populations.40

Brown argued that the findings of the study were significant enough to warrant further study, which would “assess whether PIP may be a useful adjunct to standard medical care for certain patients with auditory and/or visual impairments, especially in contexts where access to conventional treatments is limited.” She continued:

The implications are potentially vast given World Health Organization estimates that 278 million people, 80% of whom live in developing countries, have moderate to profound hearing loss in both ears, and 314 million people are visually impaired, 87% of whom live in developing countries, and only a tiny fraction of these populations currently receive any treatment.41

In other words, Brown was suggesting that work like Baker’s might serve as an effective treatment strategy in medically underserved developing nations.

Unfortunately for the study’s subjects, however, Brown’s claims were not all they appeared to be. Peter Norvig, former vision chief of computational sciences at NASA’s Ames Research Center and current director of research at Google, declared that Brown’s study suffered from several fatal design problems: it lacked a randomized control group; there was no double-blindness in the study; and the sample size for the treatment group was only 24 people.42 According to Norvig, “Rather than choose a cross-section of subjects, the experimenters specifically chose subjects from rural Mozambique who were attending an evangelical revival meeting—subjects who would be favorably inclined to (consciously or unconsciously) demonstrate a benefit from prayer.”43 Brown’s research methodology was so flawed that Norvig called it “a perfect example of how not to do experiment design.”44 Psychologist Jean Mercer, a leading authority on pseudoscience in the social sciences, further criticized Brown and her colleagues for introducing too many confounding variables into the study through their “amateurish methods of assessing hearing and vision.”45

Despite the ethical and methodological problems associated with Brown’s study, it received plentiful funding from the Templeton-sponsored FOL project ($150,000), as well as from the Lilly Endowment ($50,000) and Indiana University Bloomington ($50,000), Brown’s home university and a premier institution of higher learning.46 Brown also used the STEPP study as the basis of her 2012 book Testing Prayer, which was published by Harvard University Press. Such scholarly trajectories are becoming increasingly common for Templeton academics in a wide variety of fields. It is startling to see how many Templeton-connected academics end up publishing their work through Oxford or Harvard University Press. A 2014 report enumerating IRUL-produced books (i.e., works published or edited by IRUL associates) includes seven titles published by Oxford University Press, and another three in press or under review by that prestigious publisher.47 While not as many Templeton-associated academics seem to have linked themselves with Harvard University Press, some of those who have published through it have close links with the Foundation or are major figures in the Foundation’s history. For instance, Charles Taylor, whose A Secular Age was a major Harvard University Press publication in 2007, won the Templeton Prize for the same year.48

TEMPLETON AND THE NEW APOSTOLIC REFORMATION

Brown represents a particularly extreme example of distorted research engendered by Templeton money and legitimized by a major academic publisher. However, the methodological flaws in the STEPP study point to problems pervading the Flame of Love project as a whole—problems the Templeton Foundation should have recognized. The “Godly love” study that anchored the larger FOL project was based on the “Great Commandment to love God and love neighbor as self.”49 The researchers proposed that Godly love—the interaction between humanity
and what is perceived as the divine—can be studied through figures known as exemplars: individuals who are supposed to be unusually benevolent within their own communities, and who have often received awards and honors (both secular and religious) for meritorious acts of service. These individuals were held up as the best embodiment of the Great Commandment. This research relied on what is known in the social sciences as an inductive/phenomenological method, which sought to “better understand” the subjective experiences of exemplars. While there is nothing inherently wrong about such a research process—anthropology, for instance, often relies on the phenomenological approach—it made the Flame of Love project unusually open to political propagandizing, since the subjective experiences studied depended almost entirely on which “Godly exemplars” were chosen to represent the idea of Godly love.

Many of the Godly exemplars profiled by Flame of Love are associated with the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR), a right-wing Charismatic and Pentecostal movement organized around parachurch groups known as apostolic networks. The NAR is committed to the principle of spiritual warfare against evil spirits that it believes threaten the well-being of Christians. One such exemplar is Che Ahn, who founded the evangelical organization The Call along with Lou Engle, the Charismatic evangelical associated with the 2009-2010 Ugandan “Kill the Gays” bill. Poloma herself describes the two men’s close friendship in glowing terms.

Ahn (like Heidi Baker, another exemplar) is a member of the Revival Alliance, a powerful apostolic network that oversees six other major apostolic networks. The leaders of five of these six subordinate ministries, along with several of their spouses, are among Flame of Love’s highlighted Godly exemplars. The STEPP study, too, is marked by such connections: Alliance member Randy Clark, founder of the evangelical Global Awakening ministry, has worked closely with Stephen Mory, one of the study’s co-authors. Moreover, Candy Gunther Brown herself has served on the board of directors of the Global Medical Research Institute, a prayer research organization that originated as a Global Awakening initiative, though independent of that ministry. Subjects for the STEPP study were primarily recruited at meetings cosponsored by Global Awakening and Baker’s Iris Ministries.

The Revival Alliance leaders’ work incorporates some shocking ideas about a variety of issues, particularly mental healthcare. Baker is known for “expelling” demons from children. Another couple has helped promote the supernatural healing of autistic children through a particular form of Charismatic exorcism, or deliverance, called Sozo. As I wrote in my 2015 book The Failure of Evangelical Mental Health Care, Sozo’s healing practices seem little different from the long-discredited practice of recovered memory therapy. (Sozo leaders and proponents also maintain, in terms akin to the increasingly discredited diagnosis of multiple personality disorder, that individuals with bipolar disorder have “parts,” or people living inside of them who need to be integrated into a core personality.)

While the Flame of Love project was ostensibly a scientific enterprise, in practice the project served primarily as a public relations project celebrating NAR leaders, as well as providing an academic justification for many of their beliefs and policy priorities, including their economic agenda. The Templeton Foundation has enjoyed a friendly association with a variety of right-wing groups and think tanks that share its support for open markets and entrepreneurship; the Heritage Foundation, for instance, received more than $1 million in Templeton funding between 2005 and 2008, while the Cato Institute received more than $200,000. Relatively speaking, grants to conservative think tanks represent only a minor portion of the Foundation’s philanthropy, but even prominent conservative political voices like The National Review have pointed to the Foundation as a funder of right-wing policy drivers. Transformationalism, the NAR’s unique form of conservative economics, fits in well with the Templeton agenda; it promises a solution to global poverty rooted in the belief that the marketplace is the best foundation for economic reform.

Flame of Love co-director Margaret Poloma was herself so well regarded in the NAR movement that Charismatic leader John Arnott (yet another exemplar) entrusted her with the task of mediating a conflict between his ministry and John Wimber, a major evangelical leader who was critical of Arnott. At the time when Poloma engaged in this mediation process, she was conducting academic research on the Toronto Blessing, a revival that Arnott was leading. Most academ-
ics would seek to avoid conflicts of interest like this, but in the Flame of Love universe it is common for academics studying the intersection of religion and science to blur the lines between the academic study of revivalistic culture and participation in that culture.

In addition to all the methodological dilemmas in the STEPP study and Flame of Love's elaborate ties to the group they purport to study, there's a further conflict of interest in how the results of this research are ultimately presented. The Southern Medical Association, which publishes the Southern Medical Journal, in which Brown's paper first appeared, has twice received contributions—$98,889 in 2006 and $73,673 in 2007—from the John Templeton Foundation.66

THE FUTURE

After Sir John Templeton's death in 2008, the heir to his legacy was Jack Templeton, an evangelical doctor with abundant conservative political connections who had been active in fighting same-sex marriage and defending the Iraq War. He and his wife Josephine contributed $1 million to the fight to pass California's anti-same-sex marriage Proposition 8.67 Jack Templeton was also the second-largest donor to the Red White and Blue Fund (RWB), a super-PAC that supported Rick Santorum's 2012 presidential primary campaign.68 The younger Templeton passed away in May 2015,69 but before his death, both critics and Templeton grantees worried that Jack would steer the Foundation further to the right, and perhaps further away from mainstream science.70

The Foundation did shift its focus during Jack Templeton's reign, but not as anticipated. Previous areas of specialization, such as "spiritual information" and "humility theology," were replaced with the paradigm of "Big Questions," in which philosophy and cosmology tended to receive more emphasis.71 There remained a guiding interest in faith and medicine, but the projects approved under the younger Templeton often concentrated more on the intersection of faith and psychology than on prayer studies. While not always perfect, this work was certainly more scientifically rigorous than the Flame of Love Project. Now, with the death of Jack Templeton, it's unclear what direction the Foundation will take.

Moreover, serious repercussions from the Foundation's earlier work remain. Though the scientific community has rallied in recent years to protest the dangers of creation science and intelligent design theory, this focus on conservative responses to hard science has led many to overlook the more pressing dangers posed by right-wing influences on healthcare and social science research. Pseudoscience supporting faith healing can lead directly to the injury or death of those treated, if placebos or harmful treatments are used in place of tested and effective medical care.72

While the influence of fundamentalism is diminishing, the Charismatic and Pentecostal movements continue to gain power among the Christian Right, with growth rates unrivaled in the Christian world.73 When it comes to scientific debates, these movements are not focused primarily on evolution or cosmology, but on faith healing. It is likely that this issue area—and not the waning conflict over evolutionary biology or cosmology—will represent one of the most important scientific battlegrounds on which 21st Century conservative Protestants will make their stand.

Candy Gunther Brown herself has contended that "divine healing is the single most important category [of pentecostal religious practice]...for understanding the global expansion of pentecostal Christianity."74 And Brown is correct to point out that it is precisely in "regions of the world where poverty and sickness seem most overwhelming"—mostly regions with a colonial legacy—that Pentecostalism has seen its most rapid growth.75 As a result, this conflict may have far more immediate human costs than the creation science conflicts of the 20th Century.

Consider the large mental healthcare providers who, as I argue elsewhere, base their treatment on practices such as exorcism rather than research-tested mental healthcare interventions. In 2008, Australia was scandalized when Mercy Ministries Australia—a group of large treatment centers for young women, including many suffering from eating disorders—turned out to have based their treatment regimen on the exorcism manual Restoring the Foundations. A constant element of controversy in the ensuing Mercy Ministries scandal was the correct means of delineating the differences between faith healing and healthcare; ministries like Mercy operated in a gray area where either definition could be deemed appropriate, depending on the context.76

But even in situations where the line between faith healing and medicine is clearer, the real and potential influence of the Brown study cannot be ignored. By 2007, writer and Iris Ministries supporter Donald Kantel (who studied under Heidi Baker) claimed that pastors associated with the ministry had raised over 50 people from the dead throughout Southern Africa in a five-year period. The ministry also purported to engage in miraculous healings and supernatural multiplications of food.77 The popularization of "dead rising" teams—groups of people engaged in attempted resurrections—throughout the NAR could certainly not have been hurt by either the Brown study or the Christianity Today treatment that publicized its results. Nor can we ignore the influence of Global Awakening, whose revival events in Brazil, Mozambique, and India attract crowds of 100,000 people at a time; according to Brown, claims of divine healing often reach the thousands during such events.78 Here Brown's influence is perhaps most marked, as her books are sold by Global Awakening's own bookstore—a very unusual honor for any academic, particularly a secular academic such as Brown.79

The danger here is not so much that the Templeton study will be utilized to form new healthcare systems based on Brown's model. Rather, the problem is that Brown's research, like much of the Flame of Love project, will be utilized as a justification for preexisting Pentecostal and Charismatic healing initiatives in the developing world: a new wrinkle in an old colonial tale. This may not be the future the Templeton Foundation has envisioned for their work; yet it's the future the Templeton Foundation has helped make possible.80

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76. John Weaver, The Failure of Evangelical Mental Health Care, 66-88.