

Christopher Howse Sacred mysteries

ARTHUR Peacocke, who in appearance might be taken for a school bursar, has just won £700,000. It was not a lottery prize, but an award given by the very rich Sir John Templeton "for progress in religion". Previous winners have been Mother Teresa and Lord Jakobovits.

Dr Peacocke is much more remarkable than he looks. Born in 1924, the son of a Watford butcher, he won a scholarship from the grammar school to Oxford. Specialising in biophysical chemistry, he joined a research team that discovered that the double helix of DNA did not have a branched structure, as had been thought. Arthur Peacocke's scientific career developed in parallel with his Anglican commitment. In 1971 he was ordained.

In the 1970s, as a don at Clare College, Cambridge, he worked to link biochemistry and theology. In the 1980s he returned to Oxford (where he is a canon of Christ Church) and founded the Society of Ordained Scientists. This international fellowship attracted people who were also convinced that antagonism between science and religion was based on a fallacy.

When I spoke to him at a celebration lunch, Dr Peacocke made it clear that his theological outlook was by no means simplistic. His scientific researches have convinced him of the astonishing regularity of the universe, from the microscopic to the astronomic. He believes in God as the creator, but not one who, like a watchmaker, frames a machine, winds it up and leaves it to go.

In his latest book, *Paths from Science towards God* (Oneworld, £10.99), he knocks on the head the post-Newtonian idea of a cosmos left to follow its laws by a detached God. Indeed he is not keen on a division between the natural and the supernatural. Instead he proposes a model for cosmos and God that he calls *panentheism*. Unlike pantheism, where all is God, panentheism sees the universe within God. Dr Peacocke is not silly enough to say that creation is God's body or a part of him. But by seeing the universe inside God, as it were, like a foetus in a mother, he finds a way of preserving the deep presence in things of their constantly creative maker.

The trouble is that Dr Peacocke's model is only needed as an alternative to a metaphysics that connects up to theology. Certainly some thinkers deny the possibility of a rigorously provable metaphysics. But would they accept panentheism? Perhaps Dr Peacocke is solving a problem that does not exist. If God is the cause of the very act of existence of all things, then his immanent presence (as an infinite being who can do what he wants) is explanation enough even for providential changes in the cosmos from second to second. Of course prayer as an influence on events is puzzling, and the problem of evil insoluble, but those are different problems.

But it is pleasant to celebrate a real scientist gaining recognition for writing respectable theology. And he will not be spending his prize on a 36in Nicam digital stereo home cinema system.