

Another honour for South Africa

ONCE again a South African has earned international recognition for outstanding achievement. This week Professor George Ellis of the University of Cape Town was awarded the R10 million Templeton Prize, the world's largest annual monetary award given to an individual.

He is one of the world's leading cosmologists. His most recent work questions whether there was a start to the universe, and if there is only one universe or many.

He also believes the dialogue between religion and science is critically important, and has written on the moral nature of the universe.

The award demonstrates once again the remarkable quality of South Africans in diverse fields of endeavour.

At a time when the appalling trend of events in neighbouring Zimbabwe gives rise to pessimism in some quarters about South Africa's own future, these awards are a heartening reminder that this country has leaders and specialists of international stature.

As Ellis said when his award was announced in New York, there are limits to science, rationality and the scientific method. Many times in the past it was rational to give up hope for the future, to assume that South Africa would decay into a racial holocaust.

It did not - because of men and women of the stature of Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu. Faith and hope are always needed as well as rationality, Ellis believes. The question is how they can best be balanced against each other.

It is not only the outstanding individuals which offer hope for the future. This country also has a free press, and strong institutions, such as UCT and other first-class educational establishments, which enable individuals to reach their full potential.

South Africa can rejoice with George Ellis on his achievement of international recognition. His work may seem abstract, yet its social value is immense. We honour him.

Courageous scientist

THE HONOUR Professor George Ellis has brought to South Africa by being awarded the Templeton prize has drawn public attention to the life, and work, of a remarkable South African who prefers to shun the limelight.

But there is at least one aspect of his wide-ranging dedication to humane causes which has escaped notice.

It was Ellis who alerted the public to the state-sponsored "Third Force" violence in the 1980s, at a time when train commuters on the Rand were dying at the hands of masked gunmen and anti-apartheid activists like David Webster, Anton Lubowski, Rick Turner, the Ribeiros, the Cradock Four and so many others were falling victim to death squads.

In the nature of covert operations, there was seldom evidence which could be produced in a court of law.

The potential witnesses, the victims of these atrocities, were usually all dead. Not in a single case in a tally of at least 50 political murders were the killers ever brought to court.

As a leading scientist, it seemed clear to Ellis what was happening, when all the available facts were considered.

There was an inescapable inference to be drawn that these mass killings and acts of terrorism, as well as arson and bomb attacks on trade union and church buildings, and endemic violence in Natal, were part of centrally directed covert operations by the so-called Third Force.

Ellis's shocking conclusions, which he presented in brave articles in the Cape Times and letters to the editor, were denied by National Party government ministers and were regarded with scepticism by bodies as eminent as the SA Institute of Race Relations.

Following applications for amnesty in the TRC hearings, and from other sources, Ellis's assessment of the situation was in time entirely vindicated, implicating the security police and the former SA Defence Force intelligence branch.

His courageous action in bringing state terrorism to public attention might well have put the brakes on death squad activities.

Ellis richly deserved the Star of South Africa award, presented by then-president Nelson Mandela, as well as the Templeton prize, which acknowledged his international stature as a groundbreaking scholar as much concerned to advance the spiritual insight of humanity as to push forward the frontiers of science.

GERALD SHAW
RONDEBOSCH