

THE FAITH PAGE

Quake before the master of the universe

Nick Wyke speaks to George Ellis — cosmologist, spiritualist and social activist

WHEN George Ellis picks up this year's Templeton Prize from the Duke of Edinburgh at a private ceremony in London on May 5, it won't be his first brush with royalty. "I shared a pottery class with Prince Charles briefly while at Cambridge in the 1960s," says Ellis, whose family are thrilled at the prospect of visiting Buckingham Palace.

Ellis, a 64-year-old Quaker, cosmologist and Professor of Applied Mathematics at the University of Cape Town in South Africa, will receive the princely sum of £800,000 — the world's largest annual monetary prize given to an individual — "for progress towards research or discoveries about spiritual realities". A keen social activist, who published radical works on homelessness and unfair housing policies in the 1970s, he will be ploughing back half of his windfall into educational and neighbourhood projects.

During the Apartheid years he was a constant and vocal critic of the South African Government, and says that although the current administration does not like his continuing criticism of aspects of social policy, he is now accepted as a member of the President's National Advisory Committee.

At the core of Ellis's work is a belief that morality and ethics are a natural part of the Universe. Ask the professor about the origins of the Universe, and whether or not there is more than one Universe, and his response is baffling to the scientifically illiterate. His strides in general relativity theory — while teaching at Cambridge he wrote *The Large Scale Structure of Space-Time* with Stephen Hawking — have been greater than most mere mortals can keep pace with.

For the record, he is content to let cosmology rest in mystery. But you would be forgiven for thinking that his theories about rationality needing to be balanced with faith and hope, in order to start to understand the Universe, are not just plain common sense.

"They are indeed commonsensical, but they are in effect denied by some fundamentalist scientists and philosophers, who believe that rationality is all that we need, and dismiss emotion, faith, and hope as 'sentiment'."



Making sense of the mysterious: Templeton prizewinner Ellis

says Ellis. "So there is a need to defend many daily world propositions in the face of attack by scientists and philosophers."

Ellis gives two examples of the application of his theories in today's world. The first, when scientists devote decades of their lives to studying string theory, believing that it will turn out to be the fundamental theory of quantum gravity, they do so in the hope that this belief will turn out to be correct: "They cannot prove that it will be so, for they have not yet solved the problem."

And the second: "Many times in the apartheid years, the rational thing to do was to leave South Africa because of the coming racial conflagration; it was irrational to stay behind and hope it would work out OK. But it did work out, because of the transformational nature of the policies pursued by Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu. The interesting question is what is defensible faith and what is reasonable hope — paradoxical but important questions."

Along with Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi, the titans of recent South African history such as Mandela and Tutu embody the kinds of ideals that Ellis believes are crucial for us all. "They embody the idea of kenosis, or self sacrificing love, in their lives and actions and demonstrate thereby its transformatory powers. I am profoundly grateful for this. It has helped confirm my views on kenosis."

The idea of kenosis helps us to understand the constitution and character of our Universe and provides a common theme on which the world's religions concur. "The suggestion is that kenosis is the nature of the deep morality that will be discovered by beings in the Andromeda galaxy and elsewhere, just as they will discover the number pi and the square root of two.

"The evidence comes not from physics but from the universal accord in the deep spiritual wings of all the great world religions that love and self-sacrifice are the deep nature of morality."

Ellis grew up as an Anglican. Although his parents were atheists, he says that his mother was "supportive" of his beliefs. His "coming home" to the Religious Society of Friends (the Quakers) in 1974 seemed to tie in with his emerging professional and global outlook on several levels. "Its lack of dogma is essential for compatibility with a scientific world view, and is based in an understanding of the inability of language to grasp the nature of the transcendent," says Ellis.

The deeply thought-out social activism of Quaker societies and respect for others, based on the idea of "that of God in every person" leading to the quiet but determined work for peace, poverty and prisons, further appealed to Ellis. "I am very involved in the local Quaker meeting, which provides a spiritual home for me that I would find very difficult to leave."

In the mainstream Church, however, he feels that some of the reported decline in membership is probably due to the misunderstood perception of a science-religion clash and a residual "dogmatism in some sections of the church, no longer found acceptable by many." He adds: "I think there is an adherence to mere form rather than sincere religion and a very widespread need for spirituality which the church only partially fulfils."

On the current controversial issue overshadowing the Anglican Church, Ellis's viewpoint is informed by his own beliefs: "I do not see bishops being gay or otherwise as an issue, but would not mind if no bishops at all were consecrated. Quakers do happily without them. However, given that they exist, my concern is unbelieving bishops. What I find most strange is bishops and priests who do not believe in God but are accepted in this role by the Church."

The Templeton Prize was set up by a Wall Street banker Sir John Templeton in 1973. Its first recipient was Mother Teresa; Billy Graham has also won the award. The prize, however, most often goes to scientists whose work interplays with religious thought. Templeton insists that its bounty exceeds the value of the Nobel prize because he believes that religion is more important than the scientific fields honoured by Nobel.