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# Laser pioneer aims for God

BY MICHAEL VALPY

Charles Townes's search for the principles of the laser made him a Nobel laureate in 1964. His search for extraterrestrial life still occupies him at the age of 89 at the University of California, Berkeley. This week, his search for God earned him almost \$2-million.

The astrophysicist, considered one of the most brilliant American scholars of the past century, won the 2005 Templeton Prize for Progress toward Research or Discoveries about Spiritual Realities, the largest annual monetary prize (with maybe the longest title) awarded to an individual. It is worth £795,000 (\$1.86-million in Canadian dollars).

He says he will give most of the money away, and go on peering into the universe for signs that God the Mechanic is at work among the galaxies. Because Prof. Townes has no doubt that God is there.

In a telephone interview, he speaks of the parallel paths of science and religion — one seeking to understand the structure of the universe, the other its purpose and meaning. The differences, as he has been saying for years, are largely superficial. Rather than being labelled polar opposites, they should be seen as interacting with and enlightening each other.

All knowledge, Prof. Townes says, is tentative, incomplete and full of paradoxes. The uncertainty principle of quantum mechanics is characteristic of physics. But none of that reality leads to a rejection of science. Comparable paradoxes and uncertainties are applicable to religion, yet by what reasoning, Prof. Townes asks, should that lead to a rejection of God?

Prof. Townes, whose co-discovery of the laser earned him a Nobel Prize in physics, says that as he looks deeper into space, he sees more and more that is beyond the grasp of science.

He says he is now studying gaseous envelopes around far-distant stars, but has no idea of their purpose.

He is also drawn to the fine-tuning theory of the universe — the awareness that only a few tiny alterations in the way the universe came into being would not have created the conditions for life.

"There will always be mysteries. That's part of the fun of it, of trying to understand more. That's all we can do, is keep going. We must understand all we can both in science and in religion."

He is, increasingly, not alone in his view. He belongs to a group of scientists — by all accounts expanding in numbers — who believe that the more that science advances into the unknown the closer it intersects with religion.

Prof. Townes received the Templeton Prize — given since 1972 by global investor and philanthropist Sir John Templeton — for his lectures and writings on the relationship of science and religion.

In a statement on accepting the award, he says: "Science is so successful we are enthralled and [we] believe it. But there are profound mysteries. Many people don't realize that science basically involves assumptions and faith. . . . Nothing is absolutely proved."

*Michael Valpy writes on spiritual matters for The Globe and Mail.*