



Why the 'big one' goes to scientists these days



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It's the really big one. The one to outbid the Booker Prize's £50,000. It's even adjusted so that it exceeds the Nobel prizes. It is the largest single annual financial award given to an individual for work of intellectual merit. It is the Templeton Prize, £795,000 – around \$1.4m – and this year it has just been awarded to John D Barrow, the cosmologist. This makes it the seventh time since 1995 that the award has gone to a scientist, a conspicuously strange development given the background and the prize's history.

The prize was created in 1972 by John Templeton who hails from Tennessee and once considered devoting his life to religion.

He graduated from Yale and was a Rhodes Scholar at Balliol before beginning a career as a Wall Street financier pioneering the development of "value-based globally diverse mutual funds".

If I understood fully what that meant, I would explain it further, but I quote from his website. I've gone there because I'm fascinated by the creator of an annual prize to reward someone who has helped "accelerate growth in spiritual discoveries" (the website again). When the prize began, it was cited as for Progress in Re-

ligion. Since 2001 it has been defined as for Progress Toward Research or Discoveries about Spiritual Realities.

John Templeton thinks if as much money were invested in research into religious and spiritual matters as is invested in medicine, electronics and cosmology the results would be commensurately large. I think that means that belief in God would be more widespread, and universal peace and love more of a possibility. He also awards an adjacent Epiphany prize of \$50,000 to encourage film-makers and television producers to create movies and

shows that "increase the understanding and love of God". In 2005, Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ* lost out to *Narnia*. Lets just say that Richard Dawkins is never going to win the Templeton.

But who has won it? The judges, who include the likes of the Prince of Wales, the Dalai Lama and President Bush (senior), chose initially those with high profiles in religious circles. The first went to Mother Teresa of Calcutta, then came Frere Roger, the founder of the Taize community. Cicely Saunders, the founder of the hospice movement, was honoured in the 1980s as were Billy Graham and Alexander Solzhenitsyn. You begin to get the idea. Theologians and founders of religious institutions follow thick and fast. But then come the 1990s and the run of scientists begins.

In 1995, the winner was Paul Davies, the theoretical physicist whose view of the universe, its purpose and meaning, is a good deal more complex than the straightforward espousal of faith that had characterised earlier awardees. But he published books called *The Mind of God* and

God and The New Physics. He had used the G word and not been outlawed by fellow scientists.

In 1999, Ian Barbour, best known for work in quantum electrodynamics, joined him. In 2002, it went to The Rev John Polkinghorne, the particle physicist who became an Anglican priest, and, incidentally was later President of Queen's College Cambridge. His is the name most often cited when Christians press the case that science is no enemy to their beliefs. In 2004, it was the turn of George F R. Ellis, cosmologist, professor of applied mathematics and active Quaker; in 2005, Charles Townes, the Nobel Laureate physicist, and now John Barrow. What is going on?

I have two theories and then some. First, the religiously engaged are alarmed that science is seen as the enemy of religion and seek to embrace its findings within their own theological outlook. So they clasp respectable and highly regarded scientists to their bosom with fervour to compensate for the more wayward beliefs of their militant religious right. No scientist, for example, could endorse "the rapture", that account of the end of things that

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will sweep the Chosen upward to heaven, leaving the rest of us stewing in our own sins. But the

language of scientific discourse about how life began is sufficiently arcane to allow for mystical interpretation. From this springs that updated version of creationism: intelligent design.

Secondly, it could be that science itself is actually converging with religion in its view of creation. Theories about the patterns and structures of the physical universe play well next to the religious notion of intelligent design. Scientists are still not able to explain how life first came about, so in the work they're doing there's plenty of

scope for shared concepts. But if scientists once use the word God when they are really referring to the complex physical structure of nature then those who are religious will feel they have more in common than is, in fact, the case.

Above all, the dilemma is one of words and how we use and distort them. Einstein must take some of the blame here. When he famously said "God does not play dice", he did not intend it to imply he believed in the Deity, but rather that there was nothing random in the physical world. He was later to write of how appalled he was at being misunderstood. Likewise, Stephen Hawking whose closing line from *A Brief History of Time* suggested scientists might one day "know the mind of God" led to a similar mistake. He said later that at the proof stage he nearly cut the final sentence, adding wryly that if he had the book's extraordinary sales might have been halved. When asked if I believe in God, I always ask the questioner what they mean by God before I reply. The ensuing conversation is never conclusive.