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Astronomer's quest to link science, faith wins religion award

\$1.4 million prize goes to British professor

By Chris Herlinger
Religion News Service

NEW YORK — John D. Barrow, a British cosmologist and astronomer whose work has helped scientists and theologians find common understanding about the nature of life and the universe, was named the winner of the 2006 Templeton Prize this week.

The prize—officially called the Templeton Prize for Progress Toward Research or Discoveries About Spiritual Realities—was founded in 1972 by philanthropist and global financier Sir John Templeton and is perhaps the most prestigious award in the field of religion.

At \$1.4 million—the award is billed as the largest annual monetary prize given to an individual.

Barrow, 53, a professor at the University of Cambridge, has been acclaimed for reaching a wide audience, not only through books and lectures, but also through the theater.

The announcement was made Wednesday at the Church Center for the United Nations in New York. Prince Philip will award the Templeton Prize to Barrow in a private ceremony May 3 at Buckingham Palace in London.

In a written statement, Barrow said astronomy “has transformed the simple-minded, life-averse, meaningless universe of the skeptical philosophers. It breathes new life into so many religious questions of ultimate concern and never-ending fascination.”

He added: “Many of the deepest and most engaging questions that we grapple with still about the nature of the universe have their origins in our purely religious quest for meaning. The concept of a lawful universe with order that can be understood and relied upon emerged largely out of religious beliefs about the nature of God.”

Barrow's win continues a recent trend. While early Templeton winners were such well-known figures as Mother Teresa and evangelist Billy Graham, the prize in recent years has focused more on honoring those advancing the burgeoning field of religion, spirituality and science.

Though there has been at least one younger Templeton laureate—Paul Davies was 49 when he won in 1995—the award in recent years has generally gone to elder statesmen in the field of religion and science. Last year's winner, American physicist Charles Townes, was 89.

In an interview before Wednesday's announcement, Barrow, a member of the United Reformed Church in Britain, said that given the profile of recent Templeton winners, he was surprised as well as delighted about winning the prize.

“People tend to win these things long after they retire,” he said.

A quiet and soft-spoken man, Barrow became animated when



AP photo by David Karp

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—John D. Barrow, British astronomer and winner of the Templeton Prize

asked a question relating to science, taking out a pen and drawing a diagram. Out of such love of explanation and learning have come not only 17 books, but also a five-part play, “Infinities,” that ran two seasons in Milan, Italy, and explores the nature of the infinite universe.

One of the cornerstones of Barrow's thinking is that science has proven time and again that humanity always possesses “an interim picture of the universe.” Also, as he said in his prepared remarks, “how parochial [are] our attempts to find or deny the links between scientific and religious approaches to the nature of the universe.”

A sense of perspective about the limits of human understanding is needed in evaluating how much or how little humanity understands about the universe, he said.

That was a theme when Barrow delivered the Gifford Lectures at Glasgow University in 1989 during the series' centennial year. At 36, he was the youngest lecturer in the series' history.

The lectures examined the emerging interest in scientific “theories of everything” and led to his book “Theories of Everything: The Quest for Ultimate Explanation,” which raised as many questions as it answered. It concluded that even a “theory of everything,” while helpful, fails to explain adequately the entirety of the universe.

Barrow said religion's concern with questions of infinity and ethics have much to inform scientists. Also, he praised science's insights and methods that allow one idea to lay the foundation for another.

Albert Einstein's theories, he said in the interview, “superseded Sir Isaac Newton's theories but did not eliminate them. The old theory is contained within the new theory.” This insight, he said, would help religion realize that “pictures of reality are always approximations.”