

Indian Spiritualist Honored



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Leader of Spiritual Movement Wins \$1.2 Million Religion Prize

By GUSTAV NIEBUHR

The founder of a spiritual movement in India that emphasizes self-knowledge and awareness of God's love for all has been named recipient of the world's largest monetary award, the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion.

The announcement that the \$1.21 million prize will be given to Pandurang Shastri Athavale, 76, was made yesterday at the Church Center for the United Nations in New York.

The annual prize was established in 1972 by Sir John Templeton, an American-born resident of the Bahamas and creator of several investment funds, including the Templeton Growth Fund and Templeton World Fund. The prize's first recipient, in 1973, was Mother Teresa, founder of the Missionaries of Charity. Last year, the prize went to Bill Bright, head of Campus Crusade for Christ.

Since 1954, Mr. Athavale, who lives in Bombay, has inspired a loosely organized, volunteer movement by preaching swadhyaya (a Sanskrit word for self-study), a practice he has said leads people to cultivate greater self-respect and love for others by believing that God dwells in everyone.

His followers, called swadhyayees, have taken the message, he has said, to about 100,000 Indian villages, preaching love for God and God's love for all to people across caste lines, eventually starting cooperative farming, fishing and tree-planting projects. Mr. Athavale (pronounced ah-TAH-vah-lee) drew his principles from the Bhagavad Gita, a philosophical poem that forms a profoundly influential, sacred text of Hinduism.

Appearing somewhat frail, Mr. Athavale was helped to a lecturn by his daughter, Jayashree Athavale-Talwalkar. He then said he had tried

to raise people's consciousness that all were "the children of the same God."

"It is my experience that awareness of nearness of God and reverence for that power creates reverence for that, power creates reverence for self, reverence for the other, reverence for nature and reverence for the entire creation," he said. "And devotion as an expression of gratitude to God can turn into a social force to bring about transformative changes in all aspects of human life and at all levels of society."

He said the prize money would go to projects run by his followers.

An informational paper prepared by his movement, titled "A Silent Revolution through Swadhyaya" said the movement believed that service to God was "incomplete" unless it included raising people's consciousness about their dignity and closeness to God, and that "every human being is good" and can change for the better if approached with love and respect.

Rajat Saha, a counsellor at the Indian mission to the United Nations, who attended the prize announcement, said Mr. Athavale's movement was known in India for focusing its work on "the poorest of the poor."

The juries that select Templeton winners tend to be eclectic, combining people in religious work and secular professions; some of them are famous. Among the nine judges this year were the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, top spiritual leader of the Orthodox Church; former President George Bush; the Rev. Nichiko Niwano, president of Rissho Kosei-Kai, a Buddhist organization based in Tokyo, and Robert John Russell, a United Church of Christ minister who founded the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences in Berkeley, Calif.

Mr. Athavale was nominated for the prize by Betty Unterberger, who teaches foreign relations and Asian history at Texas A&M University.

A formal ceremony to present Mr. Athavale with the prize will be held on May 6 at Westminster Abbey, London.