

Indian religious activist wins Templeton prize

By Ira Rifkin

RELIGION NEWS SERVICE

NEW YORK — An Indian Hindu religious activist, who for more than four decades has taught that service to God is incomplete without service to humanity, yesterday was named this year's winner of the \$1.21 million Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion.

Pandurang Shastri Athavale, 76, won the world's largest annual monetary award for directing a movement that last year alone saw hundreds of thousands of volunteers, at their own expense, spend two weeks or more visiting India's poorest villages in pilgrimages designed to uplift themselves spiritually while also advancing the self-respect and economic condition of those they visit.

"Social work and divine work are the same for me," said Athavale in an interview. "Both serve society and God. Giving a day to God by working for society is the kind of worship that is worthwhile," he said.

Athavale's followers — called "swadhyayees," a Sanskrit word that roughly translates as "those who seek self-knowledge" — have, among their projects, established village farms and orchards whose produce is distributed to the needy and have provided boats to poor fishermen who



Sir John Templeton, left, founder of the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion, with Pandurang Shastri Athavale, an Indian spiritual leader, who was named this year's winner of the \$1.21 million award.

share part of their catch with those even more destitute.

More than 10 million people in over 100,000 Indian villages have been helped by Athavale's movement. "We use devotion to God as a social force," he said.

Athavale discourages proselytizing and preaches respect for all faiths.

"Mr. Athavale's innovation is that

prominent Presbyterian layman who now lives in the Bahamas, set up the prize to always have a greater monetary value than the Nobel Prize so it would be sure to draw attention to religious achievement.

Other Templeton winners include Mother Teresa, the Rev. Billy Graham, former British Chief Rabbi Lord Jakobovits, Russian writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Campus Crusade for Christ founder Bill Bright.

No restrictions are placed on how the prize money may be spent.

Athavale, who suffers from heart problems and moves about mostly in a wheelchair, said he would spread the prize money among the various projects undertaken by Swadhyaya Pariwar ("family of those who seek self-knowledge"), as his movement is called.

The movement accepts no government funds or private donations, charges no fees and has no formal hierarchy or paid staff. All projects are financed directly by volunteers.

The Templeton prize winner is selected by an international board of nine judges. This year's judges included the Orthodox Christian Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, former President George Bush and Robert John Russell, director of the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences in Berkeley, Calif.