HEALTH AND BEHAVIOR

Templeton winner has faith: To err is human and divine

By Greg Barrett
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PRINCETON, N.J. — The winner of religion's most lucrative prize (nearly $1 million) is a chuckling agnostic who does not pray and does not consider God omnipotent or omniscient. Rather, the Creator must be a bit like us, and vice versa — we're humbles.

How else to explain famine, suffering and disease?

"I think there is nothing irrelevant in that. It is part of the human condition; it is part of his condition, too," says Princeton University's Freeman Dyson, a British-born mathematician, physicist and futurist.

Dyson, 78, is the first to acknowledge he's not your typical winner of the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion, an annual award founded in 1972. Before Wednesday's award announcement in New York, Dyson, who is so diminutive his suits appear to swallow him, called the honor "unsought and unexpected."

"I am not so seriously into religion, in a way. For me, religion is a way to live. It is not a set of beliefs."

A scientific revelation

Freeman Dyson was born in 1923 in Clowthwaite, Berkshire, England, the second child of a composer/conductor father and a lawyer mother who dated on him and his older sister, Alice, a British social worker.

Dyson served as a civilian strategist for the Royal Air Force Bomber Command during World War II, and he later was a consultant for the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. His only college degree is a bachelor of arts in mathematics from Cambridge.

Dyson became widely known to science at age 24 when he found the force constant of molecules in materials and eavesdropped on the force of some rich toys — everything from lasers to laptop computers. Today, Dyson shuns cellular phones. "Oh," he says, "I still haven't gotten used to that.

The revelation about QED came to Dyson in the summer of 1948 as he traveled on a Greyhound bus from the University of California, Berkeley, to Princeton. The ride was terribly boring, he says, but not boring to rest or write. Somewhere between Nebraska and Illinois — and between fatigue and exhilaration — he synthesized the theorem.

"It's a flash, it all came to me," he says. "When we stopped in Chicago, I wrote it all down."

In 1955, physicist Richard Feynman, Julius Schwartz and Sin-Itiro Tomonaga shared a Nobel Prize for their work on QED, but if Dyson felt slighted, it doesn't show.

"I didn't discover it," he says. "I just filled it up.

Prince Philip hands Dyson his check during a ceremony at Buckingham Palace. "Lucky it's not quite a million," Dyson says. "I'm very unconfident with that word — million."

Dyson is not saying what his plans are for the sudden wealth, other than to help some of his six children (in addition to Esther, he has George, a boat designer and author; Rebecca, an emergency room radiologist; Emily, a cardiologist; Dorothy, a veterinarian; and Max, a Presbyterian minister) and nine grandchildren.