Davies’ faith in science lands $1.4m prize

By SUSAN WYNHAM in New York and PATRICK LAWHAM

PROFESSOR Paul Davies, an Australian-based physicist who once wrote "science offers a sure path to God than religion", has been chosen for the Templeton Prize for progress in religion, believed to be the world's richest annual award.

British-born Professor Davies, a prolific author and a columnist with The Australian's Higher Education section, will receive more than $1.4 million next month for his work in bridging the once cavernous divide between science and religion.

As a result, Dr Davies, the professor of natural history at the University of Adelaide, will spend more time on his research work, which he said had competed poorly in the past decade with the demands of academic work and public appearances.

He intends to focus on three topics that have "deep theological significance" - the nature of time, the mind-body problem ("the relationship between the mental world of thoughts and emotions and the physical world of atoms and forces") and the possibility of extraterrestrial life.

Professor Davies, brought up in an Anglican household in London, said he turned to science in his early teens when the local vicar could not answer his questions about creation and the universe.

He abandoned conventional religious beliefs as a teenager and became internationally known for popular presentations of his complex scientific theories about the beginning of the universe, black holes and the nature of time.

Although he rejects the idea of a personal god, his scientific research has led him to "a timeless, abstract physicist's view of God", he told The Australian in New York before his win was announced in the city yesterday.

"I cannot accept that a universe with these ingenious features and religious nature, with such mathematical order, harmony and beauty, is a package with no deeper meaning or purpose," he said.

A prolific writer, Professor Davies contributes frequently to The Australian and is the author of more than 30 books, including The Mind of God, exploring the connection between science and religion.

His three latest books, published this month in Australia, are: About Time: Einstein's Unfinished Revolution; Are We Alone? Philosophical Implications of Life in the Universe; and The Anomalies of Space: The Challenge of the Quantum Theory of Gravity.

The Templeton Prize is the largest award for religious research in the world, with the winner chosen each year by high-level judges, many of them Nobel prize winners.

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$1.4m religious prize for the professor who had faith in science

"We are... creating an institute of theoretical physics and I am quite sure that the added stimulus of this award will help to get this institute off the ground," Professor Davies said.

More immediately, Professor Davies will be on the road in Australia next week for a book promotion before a lecture tour of the United States and Britain.

He is the second Australian-based scientist to win the Templeton Prize - Sir Brian Josephson and University of Sydney emeritus Professor Charles Birch were selected in 1980.

Professor Davies, 48, came to Australia and Adelaide in 1980, deeming the science policies of the Thatcher government in Britain, saying it had a contempt for research which did not produce an immediately salable result.

He said it was Britain, not Australia as some believed, that was becoming a scientific backwater.

But the prime minister of the time, new Baroness Thatcher, came through for Professor Davies in the end - she was one of nine judges, along with former US president Mr George Bush, who chose him for this year's award.

Professor Davies, an Australian resident and the recipient of many scientific awards, is the 25th winner of the Templeton Prize.

Previous winners include Mother Teresa, Dr Billy Graham, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Professor Burch. The US founder of the prize, Sir John Templeton, 82, a pioneering global investor, justifies its value each year so that it always exceeds the Nobel Prize, which he claims unduly excludes religion as an honoured discipline.

Professor Davies will receive his prize from Prince Philip, who set this year's $1.4 million in a ceremony at Buckingham Palace on May 3.

He will address a Westminster Abbey ceremony on May 3.