Winning of Religion Prize Breaks the Mold

By Ron Scherer
Staff Writer of The Christian Science Monitor

WHEN physicists get stuck, they have nowhere to go but to theology," says Paul Davies. Last Wednesday, being stuck netted Mr. Davies, a theoretical physicist, the major award in religion - the $1 million Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion.

Davies is different from most of the past winners, such as Billy Graham and Mother Teresa. He is not religious in the traditional sense.

Davies doesn't go to church. He considers the Bible an interesting collection of stories and ideas, but deems the Bible "not God's manifest." He finds Jesus' message of love "very instructive," but adds that it is difficult with the concepts of the Trinity and Jesus as God incarnate.

Instead, Davies is considered one of the world's brilliant scientists. He has done original research on such phenomena as black holes in space and the Big Bang - widely viewed as the start of the universe's universe. He has written 22 books, including his most recent, "About Time: Einstein's Unfinished Revolution" (Simon & Schuster). He is Robert John Russell, one of the Los Alamos at the University of Adelaide in South Australia.

Davies' scientific work has led him to ask deeper cosmic questions: Is it those questions that have linked him with the religious "world?"

He has initiated a new dialog between science and religion - that is having worldwide repercussions" said the Rev. Wilbert F. F. Ron Davies, a Methodist minister and executive vice president of the Templeton Foundation. It is a press conference on March 8.

Some of Davies' books, such as "The Mind of God" (Simon & Schuster), are written for the general public. "In the books he has raised interesting questions, in an open way, that fall within religion in general and humanity's quest for meaning in God," says Dr. James Templeton judges and a professor of theology and science at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California.

Mr. Russell, the founder of the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences in Berkeley, says Davies as being at the center of position between atheists and opposing creationists, who believe in a literal word of the Bible. Davies' interest in theology started when he was a teenager growing up in East London. He would lie awake at night pondering the basic questions of life: "Who am I? What am I doing here? Is there life after death?"

He was dissatisfied with the answers he heard from the local religious events, where humans are not the center of the universe, not the pinnacle of creation, and can regain control of their destiny.

Davies believes a lot of people like science because they feel it "depressifies" the universe. They think God hides in mysterious corners," he explains. Davies, however, views science from another angle: "The more humanity learns about the universe, the more it is discovering that the universe is a self-creating and "self-organizing" universe.

Take the chaos theory, for example. On the surface the notion of an "unpredictable" universe could be disturbing. But to Davies, chaos theory shows "the creative element of nature." He sees chaos as a system within a deterministic system, "there is still some openness."

Central to Davies' message is the idea that life is not an accidental event. On the right planet at the right time. Instead, he maintains that "the emergence of life and consciousness is a very significant part of the compact of the rather special nature of the laws of physics."

Thus, there should be life on other planets. In fact, it is essential for Davies to find extraterrestrial life to show that life is not an accident, but is built into the laws of the universe.

Nevertheless, he considers finding life in other solar systems a long shot (and he doubts there is any other life in our solar system). But, he adds, searching for such life would be worthwhile "since it would be the scientific discovery of all time." In fact, in the coming years, Davies says he plans to devote more time to such a search.

He asks, "Are we the only creatures to gaze at the stars and ponder the meaning of existence, or do we share the cosmos with a myriad of reflective beings?"

Davies is confident of the answer.