$1.4m religion prize to science writer

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NEW YORK, Wednesday:
In the past it's been awarded to Mother Teresa and to Watergate burglar Charles Colson.

But this year an Australian-based academic is the winner of a religious prize that is billed as the world's most generous annual award for professional achievement.

Professor Paul Davies, a mathematical physicist at the University of Adelaide, has won the 1995 Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion, which is worth more than $1 million.

The prize was established in 1972 by the Anglo-American financier and philanthropist Sir John Templeton. The endowment is set just above the level of the Nobel Prizes, which do not cover religion or spirituality, and is topped up to keep its rich status intact.

Professor Davies's win is to be announced at a press conference in New York today. He will be on hand to acknowledge his jackpot award.

The prize's nine judges — who included former US President George Bush and former British Prime Minister Lady Thatcher — cited his research work in mathematics and physics that many theologians believe has breached the barrier between science and religion.

"In the process he has forged scientific concepts that extend well into the theological realm," the judges said in their citation.

Specifically, they said Professor Davies had "developed several important contributions to theories concerning black holes, the nature of time, the beginning of the universe and other monumental questions of modern physics" that made religion and science more reconcilable.

In a statement prepared for today's press conference, Professor Davies, 48, said his scientific career has spanned a period when science had made some amazing advances in areas that had been previously considered the province of religion.

"The most obvious example concerns the origins of the universe in a so-called big bang," he said.

"As late as the 1960s the big bang was a mysterious and largely untested concept. Today we have strong evidence from observational astronomy that the entire universe came into existence all at once about 15 billion years ago."

While the prize will be announced today, the actual presentation will be on May 5 at Buckingham Palace. The prize's value is £650,000 ($1.4 million).

London-born Professor Davies, who has lived in Australia since 1990, is the second Australian resident to win the Templeton Prize. In 1990 Professor Charles Birch, of the biology faculty of the University of Sydney shared the prize. He was cited for his work on science and faith.

Sir John Templeton made his fortune with some of the world's largest and most successful investment funds. A feature of his management style was prayer. He sold the funds and now lives in the Bahamas.

He set up his fund and endowed it so it could always offer a prize worth more than the Nobel Prizes, which he believed unfairly excluded religion and spirituality from its chosen disciplines such as peace, literature and economics.

Previous winners of the Templeton Prize include Mother Teresa, the Rev Billy Graham, Alexander Solzhenitsyn and former Watergate burglar Charles Colson, who was awarded the prize in 1993 for his work in setting up prison ministries.