When Theology Meets Cosmology

Physicist Wins Prize for Work on Science and Spirituality

By Bill Broadway
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A

ustralian physicist Paul Davies has a lot on his mind—things like God, the universe and the $1 million he will pick up in May as winner of the 1995 Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion. He also wonders whether the discovery of extraterrestrial life, when it occurs, will blow a hole in the Christian belief system.

"It's always been my position that the emergence of life and consciousness were not miracles, nor were they stupendously improbable accidents," said Davies, who explored the nature of the universe in his popular book "The Mind of God: The Scientific Basis for a Rational World" (1992). "They are part of the natural workings of the laws of physics," he said. "Of course, one of the tests of that hypothesis is whether these laws, which are universal, should work out the same basic processes throughout the universe." That means earth has no exclusive claim on life forms that have minds and, perhaps, souls.

Contact with alien communities may be a long time coming, Davies said in a telephone interview before annual conference Wednesday in New York announcing his selection for the prize. But powerful radio telescopes such as those being used in the new Phoenix Project in Australia can pick up signals from anywhere in the galaxy and may be closing the gap, he said.

Davies rejects reports of UFO sightings because he finds it "extremely unlikely that interplanetary travel takes place. It's dangerous and expensive. Why bother to do it if you can exchange information using radio?"

Belief in UFOs, like belief in angels, satisfies a need "deeply rooted in the human psyche" that "superior beings exist in the sky or beyond the sky that act as intermediaries to God," he said. But personal accounts of alien sightings and abductions, however sincerely given, are not evidence of extraterrestrial life, he said.

In anticipation of scientific proof, which he thinks is probable, "some deep theological thinking needs to be done," said Davies, who frequently discusses religion and science with ministers but has found few who have formed an opinion on alien life. "It's amazing how little they've thought about it.

The discovery of thinking beings in other worlds would have to reassess their theological positions, he said. But it is particularly problematic for Christianity because of its position that Jesus is God incarnate. That is, he said, "scents to tie the incarnation specifically to our species."

Could there be a savior for each species? Davies thinks not. "You have to wonder, if there are little green men, would God take on little green flesh? It gives a hallucinatory view of the incarnation if it's repeated as a circus act all around the universe." Christians will have to decide whether evidence of alien life can be incorporated into their belief system or will "devastate it," he said.

Davies, 48, in professor of natural philosophy at the University of Adelaide and the author of 20 books. He is the eighth scientist to win the Templeton Prize, which was created in 1972 by global investor John Mackay Templeton because the Nobel prizes lacked a religion category.

An arid view, Davies places himself among an increasing number of scientists who never go into a church or synagogue or a mosque but nevertheless are religious in the broadest sense. In "The Mind of God," he wrote that "even hard-nosed atheists frequently have a sense of reverence for nature... that is akin to religious awe."

In a citation to be presented May 5 in a private ceremony at Buckingham Palace, along with the check, Templeton judges called Davies "one of the world's most brilliant scientists. He works at the forefront of research in fundamental physics and cosmology... He has initiated a new dialogue between science and religion that is having worldwide repercussions."

That dialogue has helped reestablish a lost "link" between science and religion, said William Fulbright, vice president of the Templeton Foundation and coordinator of the prize.

The disciplines have been at odds for generations as fact-based science has clashed the "irrational" faith of Christianity and other religions. Davies argues that Western religions and science complement one another, having originated in the same tradition of Greek, Jewish, Islamic and Christian thought.

"I don't think science threatens or should threaten theology, because through science we learn more and more about how wonderful this universe is and that human beings have a place—not a central place, but we do have a place," Davies said.

In his latest book, "About Time: Einstein's Unfinished Revolution," Davies pays tribute to the paradigmatic "religious" scientist, Albert Einstein often used the word God in his deliberations on deeper issues," Davies said. Sometimes it was metaphysical, he said, but sometimes it was "beyond a way of speaking to a belief in some underlying order, some underlying purpose. Most scientists have this sort of feeling." According to Davies, Einstein's greatest contribution to science and religion may have been his challenge of the long-held Newtonian theory of absolute time that is shared everywhere in a "clockwork" universe. In his theory of relativity, Einstein holds that the traditional concepts of past, present and future have relative meanings depending on circumstances.

In answer to Einstein's question of whether God had any choice in creating the world the way it is, Davies answers yes. The world could have been different if God had chosen to make it so. Davies argues that the universe implicitly follows definite natural laws but is not a closed, mechanistic system with finite possibilities.

In the world according to Davies, where people go to see

See DAVIES, B, Oct 9
work every day, experience grief and joy and struggle with
the meaning of life, that means free will exists. It means
that we do have some choice, some measure of control over
our lives even as the world evolves.

It also means that religion must be open to new discover-
ies and ideas.

"Religious fundamentalism is a terrible corruption of
faith" because it allows for no change, he said. "We have to
find a way, you might call it a kind of post-Christianity, of
providing people—ordinary people, not scientists or theolo-
gians—a way in which they can live their lives with dignity
without being tied to ancient texts and specific doctrines
and different boring religious factions."

As science reveals more about such mysteries as black
holes, supernovas, quarks and the big bang, the alleged mo-
moment of creation, it offers even more evidence of a "grand
design" of endless complexity, Davies said. It disproves 300
years of belief that the universe is "nothing but a gigantic
collection of stupid particles colliding like cogs in a machine
and that human beings are locked in this cosmic joggernacht" stymied by fate and unable to alter their lives.

"Science can't do everything, and I'm not saying science
can be on its own a latter-day religion," he said. "But it can
provide a more reassuring framework than they've had so
far, with a deeper underlying meaning and purpose."

Davies said he has "tried to be a champion" of a move-
ment that forces people "to face up honestly and squarely
to the results of modern science where they sometimes col-
lide with or overlap with the concerns of theology." He
plans to devote his time to research, writing and attending
conferences, using the prize "to pay myself a salary the rest
of my life."

When not traveling on a book or lecture tour, Davies
lives in Adelaide with his wife and four children.

Past Templeton prize winners include evangelist Billy
Graham; Watergate figure Charles W. Colson, who started
the Prison Fellowship, a Christian ministry; Lord Jakobo-
vitz, former chief rabbi of Great Britain and the Com-
monwealth; and the Rev. Nikkyo Niwano, founder of Rissho
Kosei-Kai, a lay religious group in Japan. Last year's winner
was Michael Novak, and a Roman Catholic scholar best
known for his defense of American-style capitalism.

Among the nine judges for this year's 400 nominees
were former president George Bush, an Episcopalian, and
former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher, a Meth-
odist.