

Charles Taylor wins Templeton Prize: Philosopher addresses spirituality, violence and culture

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Charles Taylor, a Canadian philosopher whose work has touched on questions of spirituality, violence and culture, has been named the 2007 Templeton Prize winner.

Taylor, 75, teaches law and philosophy at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, and is a professor emeritus at McGill University in Montreal. He is the first Canadian to be awarded the best-known prize in the world of religion.

The award—valued at 800,000 pounds sterling, or about \$1.5 million—has been given out annually since 1973 by the John Templeton Foundation. The foundation said Taylor has long been engaged in cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary questions about the role of spirituality.

“Throughout his career, Charles Taylor has staked an often lonely position that insists on the inclusion of spiritual dimensions in discussions of public policy, history, linguistics, literature, and every other facet of humanities and the social sciences,” John M. Templeton Jr., president of the Templeton Foundation, said March 14 in announcing the award in New York City.

Taylor’s winning the annual honor—officially known as the Templeton Prize for Progress Toward Research or Discoveries About Spiritual Realities—may mark a new path for the prize. In its early years, the prize went to prominent religious figures such as Billy Graham and Mother Teresa.

More recently, the prize has been given to scientists, theologians and ethicists whose work has been focused on the relationship between science and religion. But last year the foundation unveiled a new motto—“Supporting science: Investing in the big questions”—amid efforts to avoid being mistaken as a promoter of Intelligent Design and other anti-evolutionary theories.

Indeed, in its announcement, the foundation said Taylor's selection as the 2007 Templeton laureate launches "a broad, online discussion" (at www.templeton.org) of the question, "What role does spiritual thinking have in the 21st century?" This was a hint that the foundation may switch its emphasis from science-and-religion debates to the gap between spiritual and secular outlooks.

In prepared remarks, Taylor noted that "the divorce of natural science and religion has been damaging to both," but he added that "it is equally true that the culture of the humanities and social sciences has often been surprisingly blind and deaf to the spiritual."

He spoke of the need to gain new insight into what he called "the human propensity for violence." That would include, he said, "a full account of the human striving for meaning and spiritual direction, of which the appeals to violence are a perversion."

In an interview with Religion News Service before the announcement, Taylor said he has only recently begun writing on the subject of violence—particularly organized and political violence that has religious overtones. His interest stems from the wave of political violence that began in the early 1970s in Europe and the Middle East.

Taylor said he rejects notions of a clash between the West and the Islamic world, saying there are multiple interpretations and schools within Christian and Islamic thought.

Given the prize's recent emphasis on science and religion, Taylor said news of the award "knocked me over." The Templeton Prize is the largest annual monetary award given to an individual—exceeding even the Nobel Peace Prize.

The author of more than a dozen books and a onetime Rhodes Scholar, Taylor will formally receive the award May 2 in a ceremony at Buckingham Palace in London.