

British astrophysicist wins Templeton Prize

by [Chris Herlinger](#) in the [May 3, 2011](#) issue

A British theoretical astrophysicist who has achieved renown for his study of the cosmos and for sounding warnings about the future of humanity has won the \$1.6 million 2011 Templeton Prize.

Martin J.

Rees of Cambridge University, a former president of Britain's prestigious Royal Society, was announced in London April 6 as the winner by the John Templeton Foundation. The annual prize honors an individual who has made "exceptional contributions to affirming life's spiritual dimension." Rees is a somewhat unorthodox choice because he holds no formal religious beliefs.

Rees, 68, has long studied questions surrounding black holes, the big-bang theory and what some call the "dark age" of the early universe. Rees has also speculated on the idea of infinite universes, sometimes called "multiverses," and has pondered how large physical reality actually is.

Rees has helped reshape "crucial philosophical and theological considerations that strike at the core of life, fostering the spiritual progress that the Templeton Prize has long sought to recognize," the Templeton Foundation said in announcing the prize.

"The questions Rees raises have an impact far beyond the simple assertion of facts, opening wider vistas than any telescope ever could," said John M. Templeton, Jr., president and chairman of the foundation started by his father. "By peering into the farthest reaches of the galaxies, Martin Rees has opened a window on our very humanity, inviting everyone to wrestle with the most

fundamental questions of our nature and existence," he said.

In recommending Rees for the honor, Robert Williams, president of the International Astronomical Union, said Rees "is very unusual in that he constantly touches on spiritual themes without dealing explicitly with religion. I do not know whether he is a theist, for example."

In an interview, Rees acknowledged that he holds no formal religious beliefs but honors the traditions of the Anglican Church. "I do participate in services because I value them for their aesthetic and social value," he said.

Rees has won notoriety as a scientist concerned with the survival of the planet. In a 2004 book, published in the United States as *Our Final Hour*, Rees argued that civilization likely will suffer a severe setback in the next century. He argued that humans, with their interconnected world vulnerable to disruption, have no more than a 50-50 chance of surviving until 2100 without some sort of serious event or problem linked to technology or the environment.

Though hopeful about what science and technology can do to improve life, "in terms of politics, I am not optimistic." —RNS