

Charles Hard Townes, pioneer in science-religion dialogue, dies at 99

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Charles Hard Townes, a Nobel laureate who helped invent the laser and a pioneer in the dialogue on science and religion, died January 27 at age 99.

[Townes, professor emeritus of physics at the University of California](#), Berkeley, also won the \$1.5 million Templeton Prize for Progress toward Research or Discoveries about Spiritual Realities for 2005.

Upon receiving the award, Townes said, “I believe there is no long-range question more important than the purpose and meaning of our lives and our universe,” according to a statement from the John Templeton Foundation.

Townes, who grew up as a progressive Baptist in South Carolina, attended First Congregational Church in Berkeley for decades.

Townes shared the 1964 Nobel Prize in Physics with two Russian scientists for the invention of the laser. In 1964, while a professor at Columbia University in New York City, Townes delivered a talk at Riverside Church that became the basis for a groundbreaking article, “The Convergence of Science and Religion,” which appeared in the IBM journal *THINK* and later in an MIT magazine.

That article, according to the Templeton Foundation, “established Townes as a unique voice, especially among scientists, that sought commonality between the two disciplines. Long before the concept of a relationship between scientific and theological inquiry became an arena of investigation, his nonconformist viewpoint jumpstarted a movement that until then few had considered.”