

UK astrophysicist wins \$1.6 million religion prize

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British astrophysicist Martin Rees, poses in central London, Tuesday April 5, 2011. Rees known for his theories on the origin and the destiny of the universe has been honored with one of the world's leading religion prizes. Martin Rees, a 68-year-old expert on the extreme physics of black holes and the Big Bang, is the recipient of the 2011 Templeton Prize, the John Templeton Foundation announced Wednesday April 6, 2011 . The 1 million pound (\$1.6 million) award is among the world's most lucrative. (AP Photo/Lefteris Pitarakis)

(AP) -- A British astrophysicist known for his theories on the origin and the destiny of the universe has been honored with one of the world's leading religion prizes.

Martin Rees, a 68-year-old expert on the extreme physics of [black holes](#) and the [Big Bang](#), is the recipient of the 2011 Templeton Prize, the John Templeton Foundation announced Wednesday. The 1 million pound

(\$1.6 million) award is among the world's most lucrative.

Dr. John M. Templeton, Jr. said that Rees - who professes no [religious belief](#) - was chosen because of the nature of his research, which he said invites everyone "to wrestle with the most fundamental questions of our nature and existence."

Rees tried to tackle many of those fundamental questions during his just-finished tenure at the head of Britain's Royal Society, which saw the 350-year-old body discuss issues ranging from the disputed [origins of life](#) on Earth to the possibility of eventually discovering life elsewhere.

In an interview at a London hotel ahead of the prize announcement, Rees told The Associated Press that he was attracted to "big questions which we can't answer."

One of the biggest has been posed by scientists who wonder why it is that the physical laws of the universe seemed perfectly calibrated to support human life. Even a slight tweaking of what scientists call universal constants could so alter the cosmos as to make it uninhabitable.

In one of his books, "Just Six Numbers," Rees argued that the perfect tuning was neither a mere accident nor the act of a benign creator. Instead, he said, "an infinity of other universes may well exist" where the constants are set differently. Some would be too sterile to support life, others too short-lived. Ours happens to be just right.

"It is still a conjecture," Rees cautioned, albeit one he said was being taken increasingly seriously.

Because of the Templeton Prize's focus on spirituality, recipients are often quizzed about their personal faith. In a statement and in his prepared remarks, Rees said he had no religious beliefs and during the

interview he joked that the discovery of extraterrestrial life would probably "put some theologians into contortions."

But he acknowledged that theorizing on the possibility of aliens and a multiverse did tend to leave humanity isolated on what he often calls a "pale blue dot" buried in a far corner of the multiverse.

"These thoughts do make it hard to believe in the centrality of human beings," Rees acknowledged, although he didn't seem worried.

"Being human beings ourselves, it's hard to give ourselves less consideration."

More information: <http://www.templetonprize.org> .

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