

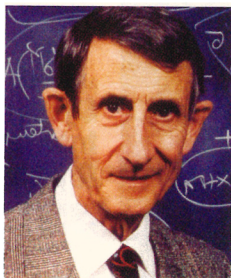
## Dyson Gets Religion Prize

It's a bit crazy—I'm doing my best to make sense of it," says Freeman Dyson, on winning this year's Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion. It's the second year running that a physicist has won the prize, which is awarded annually to "a living individual for outstanding originality in advancing the world's understanding of God or spirituality." Founded in 1972 by global investor John Templeton, the prize always outstrips the Nobels financially; this year it's worth \$948 000.

Now an emeritus professor at Princeton's Institute for Advanced Studies, Dyson is perhaps best known to physicists for synthesizing into quantum electrodynamics the seemingly conflicting theories of Richard Feynman, Julian Schwinger, and Sin-Itiro Tomonaga. He's gained a wider audience among the lay public with his books, beginning in 1979 with *Disturbing the Uni-*

*verse* (Harper & Row). His writings, he notes, "have quite a lot to do with ethics, and to some extent with religion as well."

The ethical issues that most concern Dyson are: getting rid of nuclear weapons—"still the most important, but sadly neglected"; making the Internet accessible to all; and exploiting



DYSON

biotechnology.

In his latest book, *The Sun, the Genome and the Internet* (Oxford University Press, 1999), Dyson argues that instead of widening the gap between the rich and the poor, science and technology should be used to close it. Biotechnology "will have enormous power, to cure diseases, for example. But it can be abused in all sorts of ways. We have to

watch out. It's extremely important to make medical advances available to everybody," says Dyson. "Technology must be guided and driven by ethics if it is to do more than provide new toys for the rich. It's a question of social justice."

"Social justice is something religious people care about," he continues. "A lot

of scientists care about it too. So they might get together and do something about it." Science and religion are two windows that look out on the same universe, says Dyson. "There is no incompatibility. As a scientist, I live with uncertainty all the time. As a religious person, also. Neither my science nor my religion is dogmatic."

Unusually for a scientist of his stature, the highest degree Dyson holds—not counting more than a dozen honorary doctorates—is a bachelor's, from the University of Cambridge. "The PhD is generally a tremendous waste of time. I'd like to abolish it," he says, adding that earning a PhD is worst for people who leave academia. "It's using up the best years of their lives, so they are middle aged before they can do anything. I have six kids, and I'm very pleased that there's not a PhD among them."

As for winning a prize for "progress in religion," says Dyson, "To me, 'progress in religion' means that religion should become more of a force for good—and not a force for evil. In history, it's been both." **TONI FEDER**

## French Science Minister Fired

Claude Allègre, France's minister of education, research, and technology, was one of four cabinet members fired on 24 March by prime minister Lionel Jospin, and the country's science community seems largely delighted to be rid of him.

The cabinet reshuffle was triggered by escalating troubles in the finance ministry, compounded by 200 000 teachers going on strike in March to protest Allègre's proposed school reforms. Jospin replaced finance minister Christian Sautter with Laurent Fabius, a rival and former prime minister (1984–86), as well as firing Allègre and the ministers of culture and civil service. Allègre's portfolio has been split: Research and technology are now headed by Roger-Gérard Schwartzberg, who in the 1980s oversaw the public university system; and education is under Jack Lang, who withdrew from Paris's mayoral race to take the job.

Attitudes toward Allègre, a geochemist, have soured since he first joined the newly elected government in 1997. Initially, France's science community was happy to have a scientist in the job, despite some concerns about his brusque manner (see *PHYSICS TODAY*, August 1997, page 50). Soon, however, people began to feel that Allègre didn't consult the scientific community enough, and he earned many enemies—including synchrotron users, mathematicians, and others. Overall, it was his methods, more than his ideas, that riled people.



SCHWARTZBERG

As *PHYSICS TODAY* went to press, neither of Allègre's successors had yet made his plans public. But the synchrotron user community was optimistic that Schwartzberg would give the green light to build a new synchrotron in France. Their hopes were bolstered by a recent parliamentary report that roundly condemned Allègre's August 1999 decision not to go ahead with the project.

**TONI FEDER**



ALLÈGRE

## IN BRIEF

**Satellites fried.** Radio astronomers aren't shedding tears over the demise of Iridium LLC's global telecommunications satellite system. Since even before the company started launching its 66 satellites in 1997, radio astronomers have had to fight hard to protect the 1610–1613.8 MHz hydroxyl band from spillover from the satellites' space-to-Earth signals. (See, for example, *PHYSICS TODAY*, November 1996, page 71, and October 1998, page 75.) Designed, built, run, and largely owned by Motorola Inc, the \$6 billion satellite system was intended to provide phone, fax, and beeper service worldwide. But only around 50 000 people subscribed—about a tenth as many as would have been needed to keep Iridium LLC solvent—and the company declared bankruptcy last August. Unless a buyer is found soon, Motorola plans to burn up the satellites in Earth's atmosphere. Even with the Iridium system out of the way, however, the electromagnetic spectrum is becoming increasingly crowded, and radio astronomers can expect hard negotiations with future satellite ventures. ■

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