

religious studies

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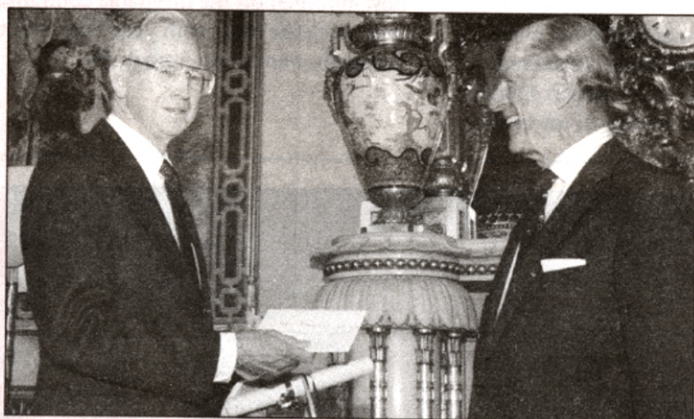
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Member-at-Large

An Interview with Holmes Rolston, Colorado State University, and Templeton Prize Laureate 2003



Rolston receives Templeton Prize from the Duke of Edinburgh at Buckingham Palace.

*Holmes Rolston III is University Distinguished Professor and Professor of Philosophy at Colorado State University. He has written seven books, most recently *Genes, Genesis, and God* (Cambridge University Press), *Science and Religion: A Critical Survey* (Random House, McGraw Hill), *Philosophy Gone Wild* (Prometheus Books), *Environmental Ethics* (Temple University Press), and *Conserving Natural Value* (Columbia University Press). He gave the Gifford Lectures, University of Edinburgh, 1997–1998. Rolston has spoken as distinguished lecturer on seven continents. He is featured in *Fifty Key Thinkers on the Environment*, edited by Joy A. Palmer, and is past and founding president of the International Society for Environmental Ethics. He is a founding editor of the journal *Environmental Ethics* and has served on the Zygon editorial board for two decades. He is a founding member of the International Society for Science and Religion.*

Editor's Note:

Holmes Rolston will speak on "Caring for Nature: from Fact to Value, from Respect to Reverence" (A277) on Sunday, November 23 from 4:00 PM – 6:30 PM at the Annual Meeting in Atlanta in the Hilton Hotel, Monroe room.

RSN: First of all, congratulations on receiving the Templeton Prize! This is quite an honor. Can you tell us how you first learned that you received the award?

Rolston: Thanks. Yes, it is an honor, but for me it is just as big a surprise. This prize wasn't anywhere on my horizon. I was sitting at my travel agent's desk last January and got a page from my wife. I answered it on my agent's phone and my wife said, "I just got a phone call from Jack Templeton, who says he needs to get in touch with you urgently." I called him and he broke the news, and made me promise not to tell anybody else (except my wife) until the press conference March 19 in New York.

RSN: You received the award at a private ceremony in Buckingham Palace at which the Duke of Edinburgh presented the award. Can you describe the event?

Rolston: They put my wife and me up in the fanciest hotel I have ever stayed in (Claridge's in London), and we left from there in a cavalcade of five of the fanciest cars I have ever ridden in. We were halted by guards at the palace gate, cleared security, and were shown into the Chinese room, handsome with Chinese art. We had been given protocol about not speaking to the prince until spoken to, how to bow (optional for internationals), how to

address him as "Your Royal Highness"; and we were lined up to be presented to him (about two dozen of us were present).

Shortly Prince Philip appeared, walking down a long hall, and Jack Templeton (son of Sir John), accompanied by the prince's equerry (I had to look that word up), presented us each to the prince. The ceremony proceeded; the prince was gracious and cordial. Afterward, rather to everyone's surprise, he lingered to converse for a time. Remember that he was honorary director of the Worldwide Fund for Nature for fifteen years. He gave me a set of speeches he had made on the conservation of nature.

RSN: Your generosity in donating the prize money to Davidson College is magnanimous. Can you give us any insight into your decision to donate the prize money to your alma mater?

Rolston: Davidson is an excellent liberal arts college, and self-consciously a Christian institution. That's where my intellectual life got started fifty years ago, particularly my interests in science and religion and in the concept of nature. I'm mortal, and, though still in good health and still on the job, I realize I am drawing toward the end of my career. I'd like to

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think the inquiries I have found worthwhile can go on another fifty years and more, indeed it is urgent that they should, and Davidson is as good a place as I know for that to happen.

I was presented the check, which, converted from sterling, came to between \$1.1 and 1.2 million, about noon and at a larger reception at the Oxford and Cambridge Club that evening I presented it to Davidson College's vice president for development, so I say I was a millionaire for six hours. Maybe that's long enough for a religious type and a tree-hugger like myself.

RSN: Can you tell us about your work in environmental ethics? What has been the greatest influence on your notions of the natural world?

Rolston: Three things: First, a lot of immediate experience in nature. I'm a pretty good naturalist, and over the years I've spent a lot of time in nature, often backpacking, and often alone. Secondly, I've taught for a third of a century here at Colorado State University, with a lot of world-class biologists with whom I have interacted. And third, down at my roots, I grew up in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, with Scots Presbyterians, who loved the gospel and their landscape.

RSN: What has been the reception of your

recent book *Genes, Genesis, and God* (1999)?

Rolston: Some splendid reviews by some people who really count, both philosophers and biologists. I could cite some great praise (and I suppose my nominator did, since I did win this prize). But I also think that both theologians and biologists should take the book more seriously than they have. Too many theologians don't want to work through hard argument with biologists. Too many biologists don't know how to handle hard criticism when they extrapolate too far from their biology and make claims about religion and ethics. Biologists aren't that comfortable with philosophy of science.

RSN: Can you tell us about your current academic life? What are your current areas of research?

Rolston: I've been pulled off course by two things. One is that people keep asking me to do things again that I have already done before, and, while I enjoy making lectures as widely as I do, this takes time. Typically, people want articles that only rework what I have already done. Secondly, the Templeton Prize has produced an avalanche of activity. Again, you are glad to have attention called to your work, but when you answer all the requests for lectures or for interviews (like this one!!); there isn't much time left over. Remember, I still need to get outdoors.

When life settles down and I can get back

to steady research, I am pressing the question of how humans are like and different from wild nature, the nature-culture question. Most of my environmentalist friends think I ought to be a deep ecologist and place humans firmly in nature. I do think that humans evolved out of nature, but I also think they did just that, made some exodus from nature.

Humans are the only species with a cumulative transmissible culture, and I think that is something novel on Earth. We decoded our genome only to find that, although we are not much different from the primates genetically, there is still a radical difference in our brain power. We are reflectively, self-consciously moral, and we are religious. We have "spirit" (if you like); we debate good and evil and the meaning of life. With our current technological power, the future of Earth is in our hands. No other species is like that at all. I'm trying to link and to discriminate human nature, culture, and wild spontaneous nature.

RSN: What are your ideas about the current and future condition of the global environment?

Rolston: At the turn of this millennium, I see four main problems on the world agenda: war and peace, development, population, and environment. They are all related. Nations struggle for power, for control over markets and natural resources. The developed world contrasts

strongly with the developing world; the rich get richer, the poor stay poor. Consumerism escalates, populations escalate, quite dramatically over the last century. This has produced an environmental crisis. We face huge and complex problems, and often they need to be solved together.

RSN: If you were able to change anything regarding the global environment, what change or changes would you make and why?

Rolston: There was great insight in the Hebrew prophets, who preached that Israel was given a land flowing with milk and honey, but if, and only if, they lived in the land with justice and charity. I'd like to expand that vision to the whole Earth. We live on a promising planet, a promised land, if you will, but we can inherit this Earth only if we learn to live on it with justice and charity. Global capitalism holds as much threat as promise, unless and until it can learn this lesson from religion. So I need to keep faith in the picture; science can't teach us what we most need to know about nature: how to value it, and how to encounter it for more abundant living.

Maybe my getting the Templeton Prize will draw some attention to these critical issues on which our destiny and the fate of Earth depends. If that happens I will really be a winner, and everybody else (human and nonhuman) will win, too. ■