

# Blessing the planet

*Templeton Prize winner links ecology to theology*

Science, religion and awe.

For a moment of comfort in this week of war and chaos, we pause to salute a college professor who speaks of justice, charity, and grace in environmental terms.

As a preacher's kid and grandkid growing up in rural Virginia, Holmes Rolston 3d was spellbound by the mountain majesties flanking the Shenandoah Valley, its streams and wildlife. With that reverence, he embarked on an educational journey to figure out nature, through the order of physics, the mystery of theology, and the wonder of science.

Along the way, Rolston, 70, nourished a philosophy — marrying biology and religion — that would influence folks around the globe: environmental ethics. His wonder turned to horror, he says, when he realized the environment was in crisis.

"No sooner did I discover that nature is grace than I found we were treating it disgracefully."

Widely considered a father of today's environmental movement, Rolston is the 2003 winner of the Templeton Prize; at 725,000 pounds sterling (roughly \$1.2 million) it's said to be the world's richest annual award.

The award is administered by the Templeton Foundation of Radnor, which was founded by Sir John M.

Templeton, the mutual funds entrepreneur.

Unlike anthropocentric thinkers who put humans at the center of importance in environmental matters, Rolston is an "ecocentric," who puts us in our place on this planet — mere equals with creatures, plants, species and ecosystems.

That means we have no right to devour Earth's bounty at nature's expense. Instead, our duty is to protect species and ecosystems from destruction. "It is not simply what a society does to its slaves, women, blacks, minorities, handicapped, children or future generations," he says, "but what it does to its fauna, flora, species, ecosystems and landscapes that reveals the character of that society."

A Presbyterian minister like his father and grandfather, Rolston teaches philosophy at Colorado State University. After collecting the prize in May in ceremonies at Buckingham Palace, he says he'll spend it all to further his life's studies, endowing a chair in religion and science at his alma mater, Davidson College in North Carolina.

"We must encounter nature with grace, with an Earth ethics, because our ultimate environment is God — in whom we live, move and have our being."

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