

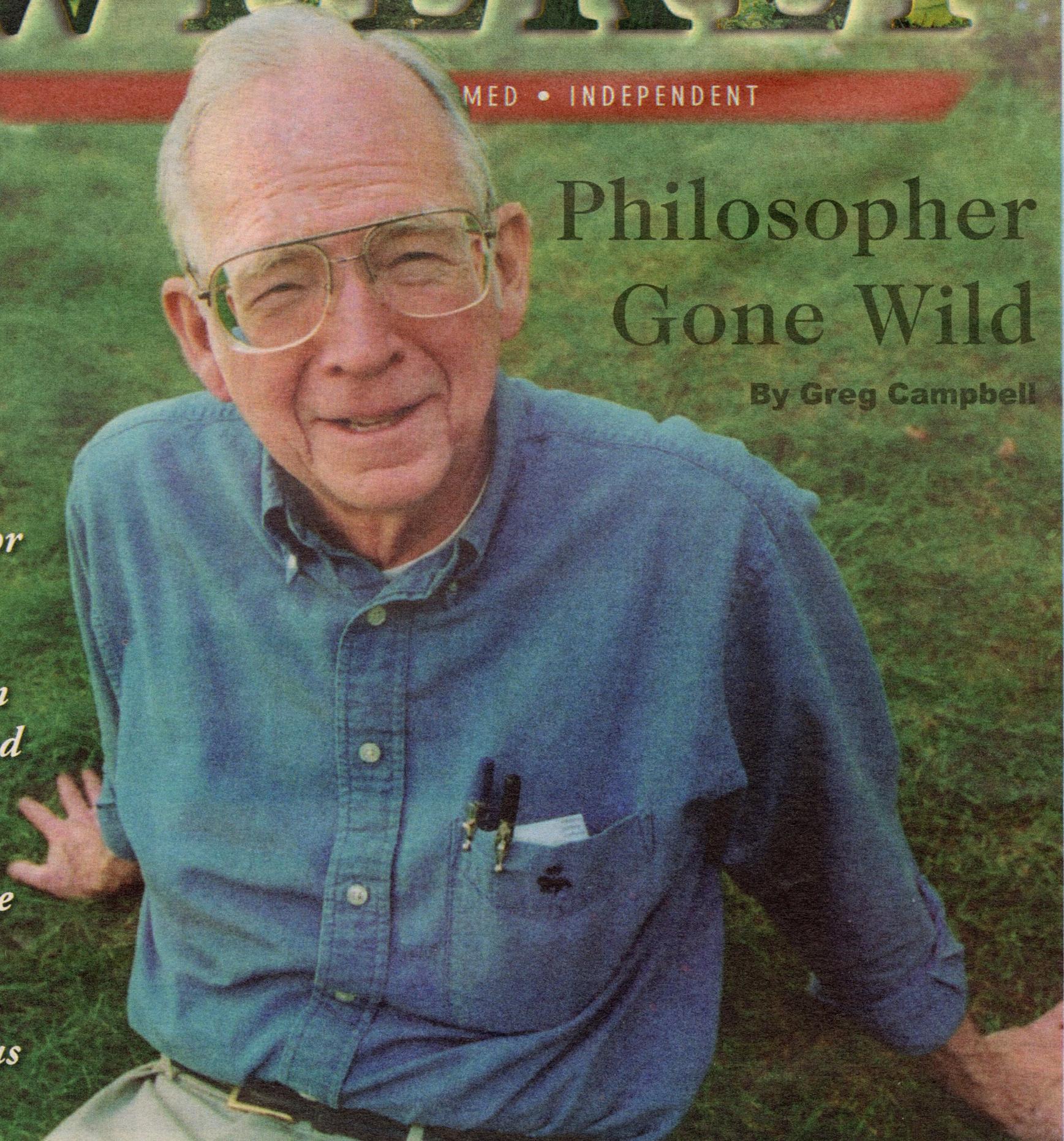
# WEEKLY

MED • INDEPENDENT

## Philosopher Gone Wild

By Greg Campbell

*CSU  
professor  
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—and  
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# A Philosopher Gone Wild

*CSU professor makes peace between God and science  
—and wins the world's most generous award*

**By Greg Campbell**

The father of environmental ethics has won the jackpot.

Dr. Holmes Rolston III, a Colorado State University philosophy professor, was awarded the world's most generous prize March 20 for inventing the field of environmental ethics, a discipline that teaches that there's more to nature than pretty colors and soothing sounds—nature, he says, also has intrinsic value and therefore, religious significance.

Holmes will receive the Templeton Prize, valued at more than \$1 million, on May 7 in London's Buckingham Palace. He will use the money to endow a chair in his name at his alma mater, Davidson College in North Carolina, in the fields of science and religion. Holmes has spent the better part of his life looking to make peace between these two seemingly dissimilar disciplines.

As a Presbyterian minister with a Ph.D. in theology and religious studies, a master's degree in philosophy of science and a bachelor's degree in physics—as well as being a self-proclaimed environmental activist and accomplished biologist—Rolston has had his hands full making the world of science mesh with the world of God.

His resulting philosophies represent ground-breaking ideas about intrinsic values in nature and have made Rolston the leading voice for protecting Earth's biodiversity—not only out of respect for nature, but also due to what he calls religious obligation.

A gentle-spoken man, Rolston is appropriately down to earth and it's not surprising that he likes to spend a lot of time outdoors. At age 70, he's an avid jogger (to stay in shape to walk in the woods, he says) and a self-described "canoe freak." Future outdoor adventures include a 10-day horseback trip in Montana this summer as well as an excursion to Uganda to look for gorillas. His understated Southern drawl reveals a witty sense of humor: he recently purchased his own tombstone for the family church cemetery in Virginia with the epitaph "A philosopher gone wild."

With the April 22 Earth Day just ahead, Rolston took time out from a busy speaking

engagement schedule to chat with *Fort Collins Weekly* about God, global warming and the obligations of human culture.

**Fort Collins Weekly:** For those unfamiliar with your teachings and ideas, is there a simple way to describe in your words what your philosophies are?

**Dr. Holmes Rolston:** I wear two hats. One is the science and religion hat. I have been concerned with evolutionary and natural history—the Darwinian picture—and reconciling that with monotheistic and Christian beliefs.

The other hat is my environmental ethics hat, where I've argued value in nature, what I call an intrinsic value in nature. Not to change the metaphor, but the two hats, in my mind, are two sides of the same coin. That is to say that both have to do with finding something. If you are of the religious mind as I am, creation is sacred, creation is to be revered. If you are not all that inclined to be religious, then I'm going to try to persuade you that you ought to switch the word from "reverent" to "respect." You ought to respect nature because there is value present in nature. I'm kind of a switch-hitter between the secular world, you might say—talking them into respect for nature, intrinsic value in nature—and the religious world and reminding them of a sacred creation and that they must care for that creation.

**FCW:** In a lot of your writings, you discuss this ongoing dialogue between religion and science and the

attempt to reconcile them.

**Rolston:** It's been going on 400 years, in some sense it's been going on for thousands of years.

The dialogue became more intense as science became more powerful. We

search about the heavens, the galaxies, we have scientific accounts of (the creation of the universe, which) was for a long time simply

speculation.

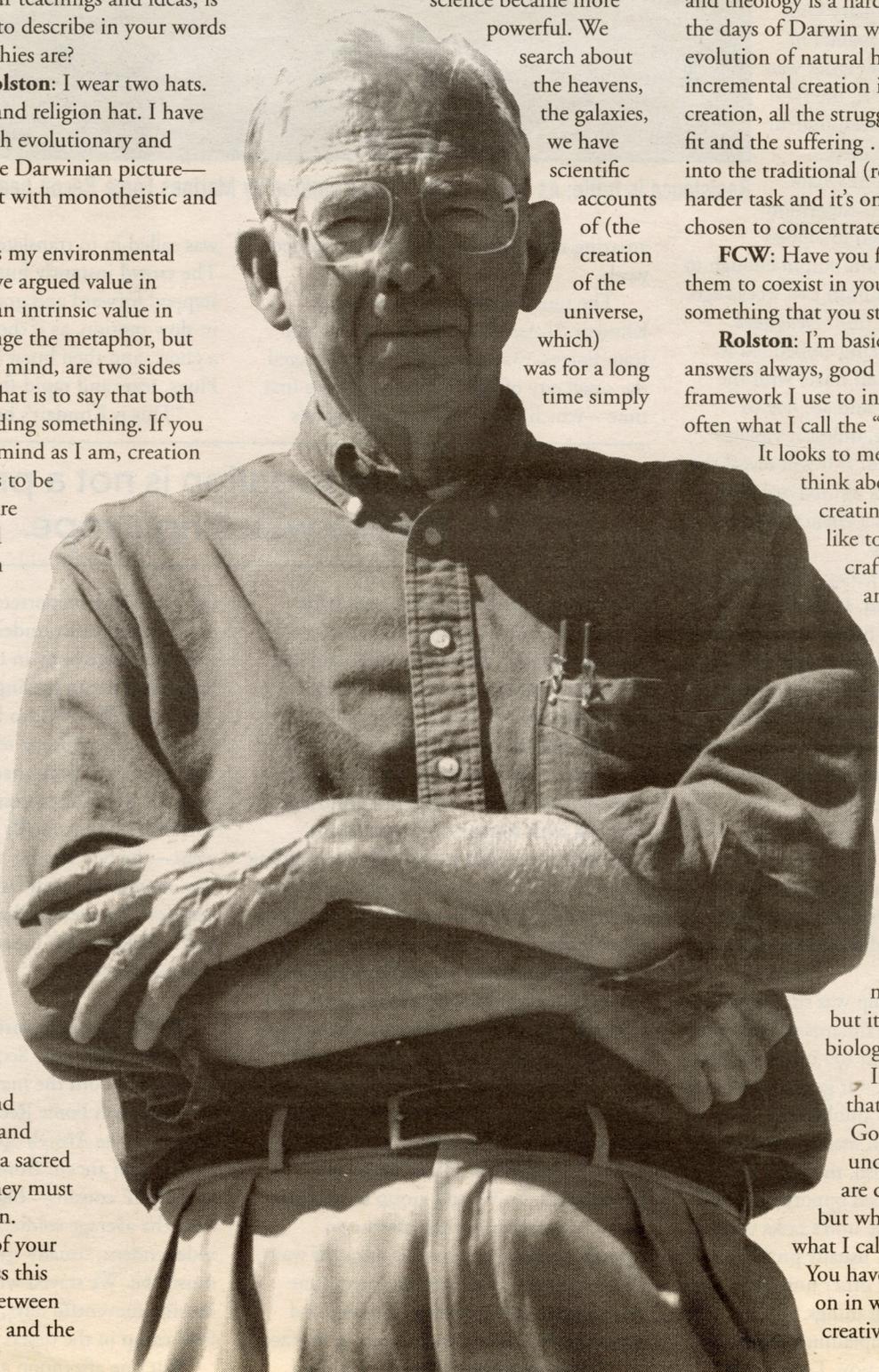
I don't think it's so difficult to keep religious perspectives and astrophysics together. The world of physics and theology is reasonably congenial, however biology and theology is a harder path to walk. Since the days of Darwin we've had an account of evolution of natural history, that there's an incremental creation in which the process of creation, all the struggle, and the adaptive fit and the suffering ... throwing all that into the traditional (religious) picture is the harder task and it's on that task that I've chosen to concentrate.

**FCW:** Have you found a way for them to coexist in your mind, or is that something that you still struggle with?

**Rolston:** I'm basically looking for answers always, good answers. The general framework I use to interpret these things is often what I call the "cruciform creation."

It looks to me like, when you think about God and God creating the world, people like to think of him as a craftsman, an engineer or an architect. Therefore, they wanted a God who made a product that was well-made and complete. They had that model of creation, and that model of creation might still be a good thing, because we do have a world that's surprisingly well put together. This idea of an engineer might work really well, but it doesn't work well in biology.

In biology, the God that you need is more of a God who is in, with and under the creatures who are doing their own thing but who need inspiration, or what I call "possibility space." You have a struggle going on in which there's self-creativity.



I'm a college professor, but I don't engineer a student's education. What do I do? I try to open up possibility space so the student can do his or her own thing, but they can get some ideas ... for the most part, these students, they couldn't do it from scratch. They can only do it if they have an intellectual environment ... it gives you possibilities that you wouldn't have if you were on your own. I see an educator as sort of opening up the possibility space.

God is said to be a father. Now take parenting as educating. When you raise a child, you don't engineer the child, you work with the child, the child does its own thing, but the parents make it possible for the child to learn language, to read and write.

I'm struggling for a metaphor to describe the creatures that are creating themselves but they can't do this unless they have parents, possibilities, the context of instruction. And that seems to me to include the element of struggle. Sometimes you can't be good without pushing hard and struggling and often failing. In my mind creativity has always involved intense effort.

Now we're prepared to put the Darwinian picture of creativity involving effort in with this picture involving life, death, and life perpetually regenerated in this ongoing struggle. Now I'm going to say that's not all that different from the picture often given in the Hebrew Bible or in the Gospel in which there's life and death and rebirth.

So the religious theme is sort of life perpetually regenerated in the midst of its struggle. At that point, the cross, a kind of a symbol of life and death and life reborn and the general character of Christian life ... isn't all that radically different than the picture you have in the biological world in where everything survives by a struggle.

**FCW:** Are humans specially equipped to influence this cycle?

**Rolston:** Yeah, I think they are. Humans are unique. Humans have evolved—I'm not a six-day creationist or anything like that; I believe the universe is 15 billion years old and the planet Earth is four and a half or five billion years old—but I do think that humans are a unique species. They evolved *out of* natural history and the coyotes *did not* evolve out of natural history. They stayed *within* natural history. So now I do make more contrast than many of my environmentalist friends think I should between nature and culture.

In "culture" you have ideas that pass from mind to mind: you're sitting there trying hard to get a fix on the ideas I have in my mind and I'm sitting here wondering if I am communicating the ideas that are in my head. Wolves can't do that.

Culture is built on the cumulative transmission of ideas from mind to mind over hundreds of years. There's nothing like that in the wild. It makes humans unique and it gives us unique responsibilities as well as unique privileges. Humans are the only species who know we're on a planet

named Earth, yet we put it in jeopardy. This century the environmental crisis has become evident. We jeopardize the integrity and stability of the planet as a whole.

We know about it, we complain about it, so in that sense we have conscience. Now my claim has been—enlarging the claim of others—that that conscience needs to be directed not simply toward other human beings—and I don't deny for a minute that we ought to consider other human beings—but I think this conscience needs to be directed toward the plants and animals. Where there's value in nature (and) we put it in jeopardy, it's our moral duty to consider it, to think about it. On the whole I think we have to justify the destruction of value. We've got to get some sense of duty and responsibility for saving and conserving. That's my environmental ethics hat.

**FCW:** Do you see a time where you'll be able to wear both those hats at the same time—the religious and the environmental ones?

**Rolston:** Generally speaking, there's a kind of convergence. I would say that more and more scientists on this campus—scientists aren't all of them died in the wool atheists—are more and more concerned about getting nature properly valued. In general, scientists are more sensitive than ever to the presence of values in nature that in some sense transcends natural resources use. Likewise the religious communities, in fact every one of them, has had a denominational study group reviewing some new policy about how Christians (can value nature). There's a certain convergence between the quote-unquote secular concerns for saving nature and the quote-unquote spiritual concerns for saving nature.

**FCW:** How do you turn your ideas into actions?

**Rolston:** Well, I'm also an activist. I've published works with the U.S. Forest Service, I was an invited speaker at Yellowstone National Park. They wanted to know about the intrinsic values in nature and how the park can be less about sort of entertaining tourists and giving them a good time and more about encouraging them more about respecting nature. The World Congress of Parks meets next year in South Africa and as part of that I wrote the chapter on the religious dimension of recreation in parks.

My audience has never been other philosophers ... I like to be heard by the decision-making public. Now, the guy in the Winnebago with the six pack, he probably won't know who I am, but the superintendent of Yellowstone National Park certainly knows who I am, the (former) head of the Forest Service knows who I am.

**FCW:** One thing I was surprised to read is that you are "cautiously optimistic" about the future given the drought that we're in and the fire season we're facing

and on a larger scale, the war in Iraq. I was wondering if you could expand on that given the current state of affairs.

**Rolston:** You got to think back 50 years. We've had 300 or 400 pieces of Congressional legislation that deal with the preservation of nature. We've had the Endangered Species Act, we've had the Wilderness Act, Clean Water Act. So we got over 600 wilderness areas (protected by the government) and there wasn't a one of these when I started out. A nation setting out over 600 wilderness areas on its landscape under the general idea that people can visit here but that's the end of it is very encouraging. No development ever.

The Endangered Species Act has had more fallout than people thought of when they passed it, so it's sort of in limbo. Where it is now is that it's a popular act, no legislator can be against it, but legislators answering to big business would like to erode it around the edges. They don't want to pass it again but neither do they want to cancel it because it's popular and Americans are proud of it, rightly so.

We have laws about cruelty to animals. Here in Colorado we banned bear hunting with dogs and bait. I mean, that's interesting wildlife and wildlands (policies). Look at the landscape we'll inherit. The Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, they're very popular acts. There's going to be fishable, swimmable, drinkable water in our rivers and streams. In the last 50 years you couldn't do anything with those rivers.

But I *am* cautiously optimistic. We have escalating consumer appetites. The result of capitalism going global generally is that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Generally speaking, the big rich nations are richer and exploit more of the world's resources and build more shopping centers and malls. Populations are slowing down in some places and that's promising, but

generally speaking the population problem hasn't stopped. Global warming doesn't look good. It would look better if the U.S. would cooperate (with the Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change, signed by 37 nations and the European Union). It could ruin a lot because it could come so fast that the wilderness areas can't track it. If it gets warm slightly, then these ecosystems can track with it, but if you get warming in 10-15 years that you wouldn't have gotten in 300 years, then these places can be radically altered. So that's a downer. People are not good at detecting incremental risk. Do you know the metaphor of the cooked frog?

**FCW:** Yeah, if you put a frog in a pot of water you can slowly heat the water until it boils and he won't jump out.

**Rolston:** Yes, you can kill him that way. But throw him into water already boiling and he'll jump out. So people may end up like the cooked frog. People don't have much of an evolutionary heritage or tradition over the centuries of worrying way off yonder about future generations and they have to do that. The ecosystems don't teach them to do that. People are not very good at judging small risk ... or detecting incremental change. Our tendencies are to be short sighted. We want to know about our children and grandchildren and that might be enough to help a lot, but we don't worry enough about the long-term future.

**FCW:** Your ideas are certainly fascinating and winning the Templeton Prize, I'm sure that's an exceptional acknowledgement for you.

**Rolston:** Well yes, but it ain't easy to have your prize announced on the day we go to war in Iraq.

You're pleased to have a prize. You're really pleased because it draws attention to your work and you hope that the causes for which you have stood will get the attention they deserve. ♪

## A Life Well-Lived

Holmes Rolston began his career in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia where his father worked as a pastor. It was there that he was first exposed to God in the beautiful vales of the Scots Presbyterians. He earned a bachelor's degree in physics from Davidson College in Charlotte, N.C., in 1953, and immediately pursued a religious education. He earned a Ph.D. in theology and religious studies from the University of Edinburgh in Scotland and served as a minister for several years before returning to school, earning a master's of philosophy from the University of Pittsburgh in 1968. He then moved to Fort Collins where he has been a professor of philosophy at CSU ever since.

In 1975, Rolston's big break came with the publication of "Is there an Ecological Ethic?" in the journal *Ethics*. The article questioned whether or not there could be a philosophically respectable answer to the question it posed and ended with an invitation to love nature.

In 1986 and 1988 he wrote "Philosophy Gone Wild" and "Environmental Ethics," respectively, as well as a number of articles in forestry and nature journals.

In 1999, he was invited to present his ideas at the prestigious Gifford Lectures, his big opportunity to "get my act together," in Rolston's words. The resulting work, titled "Genes, Genesis and God" represents Rolston's best effort to "make sense of the Earth story."

On March 20, Rolston won the Templeton Prize, which recognizes discoveries that "advance understanding of God and spiritual realities." Valued at \$1.13 million, it's the largest cash prize given to an individual. Former winners have included Rev. Billy Graham and Mother Teresa.

Rolston will donate the entire prize to Davidson College to endow a chair in science and religion. He will receive the prize on May 7 in London. ♪

—Greg Campbell