Pastor’s earthly passion honored
$1.2 million prize goes to CSU prof

By Coleman Cornelius
Denver Post Northern Colorado Bureau

Holmes Rolston III, an ordained Presbyterian minister widely known as the father of environmental ethics, went for a hike in a Colorado wilderness area where he spotted a rock-clinging tundra moss he couldn’t identify.

A longtime Fort Collins resident, Rolston became a moss expert because most people consider the velvety clusters “worthless,” he said. But his appreciation paid off. The rare moss Bryum knowltonii that Rolston discovered above treeline in the Mount Zirkel Wilderness Area in 1981 had never before been found in the United States.

His sighting helped broaden understanding of alpine ecology.

**Minister’s passion takes prize**

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“I’m surprised because I’m just not sure I’m in this class,” Rolston, 70, said last week in his study, surrounded by wildlife sketches and theological tomes. “Here I am at a cow college in Colorado, and here I get the award.”

The Templeton Foundation said Rolston won because his research, writing and lecturing on the religious imperative to respect nature have helped create environmental ethics. Some of his best-known lectures were collected in a 1999 book called “Genes, Genesis and God.”

He is “one of the world’s leading advocates for protecting the Earth’s biodiversity and ecology in recognition of the intrinsic value of creation,” the Templeton Foundation said in announcing the winner.

The Duke of Edinburgh will present the prize in a private ceremony at Buckingham Palace in London on May 7.

“Why do I get the award? I get the award because I’ve made a lot of noise about respect for nature, reverence for nature, the intrinsic value of nature,” said Rolston, who was born the son of a country preacher in Virginia.

“Rolston’s oddball interest in the natural world turned out to be the environmental agenda,” he said.

In acceptance remarks Wednesday, Rolston referred to the global environmental crisis that has coincided with his own evolution as a religious philosopher.

“No sooner did I discover that nature is grace, than I found we were treating it disgracefully,” he said, later adding, “We must encounter nature with grace, with an Earth ethic, because our ultimate environment is God.”

The CSU philosopher said he would donate his entire monetary award to his alma mater, Davidson College, a liberal-arts school with ties to the Presbyterian Church near Charlotte, N.C. The college will use the money to establish an endowed chair in science and religion, Rolston said.

Perry H. Biddle Jr., a Presbyterian Church official in Tennessee, nominated Rolston for the Templeton Prize, calling him a “senior thinker” who has joined theologians and biologists in respect for nature.

Rolston has offered a “vision of Earth as the promised planet” and called on people to live here “with justice and love,” Biddle wrote. Rolston, a self-described “canoe freak and tree hugger,” said he spends much of his time outdoors — whether it’s hiking Greyrock Mountain outside Fort Collins, rafting the Colorado River, taking a 10-day horseback trip in Montana or searching for the wild species of Ethiopia.

“It’s just nice to be in the woods,” he said. “You’re in the presence of something primordial, an elemental creativity. You’re sort of down to roots and sources. For me, it’s like being in church.”

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**KEY WRITINGS BY HOLMES ROLSTON III**

- “Is There an Ecological Ethic?” (Ethics, 1970)
- “The Paucityfall” (Natural History, 1979)
- “Philosophy Gone Wild” (Prometheus Books, 1986)
- “Environmental Ethics” (Temple University Press, 1988)
- “A Forest Ethic and MultiValue Forest Management” (Journal of Forestry, 1991)
- “Dendrism in Nature” (The Morist, 1992)
- “Genes, Genesis and God” (Cambridge University Press, 1999)

Source: Templeton Foundation website, www.templeton.org