

Interview with **Holmes Rolston III**

Our obligations to nature

By **Stacey Vanek Smith**

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If Isaac Newton owes his theories on gravity to an apple, Holmes Rolston III owes his philosophies to a flower.

While hiking in the mountains of Virginia, Dr. Rolston spotted a whorled pogonia, an endangered yellow and white orchid that grows in the Eastern United States. He sat and pondered the rare beauty. "I thought it was a good thing the flower was there, whether a human saw it or not," recalls Rolston, a tall, lean man with sparkling blue eyes and a quiet manner. From this encounter, Rolston began to form his ideas on the intrinsic value of nature and man's spiritual and ethical obligation to preserve it.

This concept has become the *raison d'être* for the philosophy professor, who says he has spent his life in a lover's quarrel between science and religion. Though most scientists and environmentalists would hesitate to plant trees for God, and most religious leaders would not call deforestation a sin, Rolston insists the two are undeniably connected.

The earth, says Rolston, is the Promised Land of milk and honey referred to in the Bible, and man has a duty to protect it. He discussed this concept in his first article, "Is There an Ecological Ethic?" (1975). "We have a duty to preserve the whooping crane, and a duty to preserve the wolves," he says. "We have a duty to preserve endangered plants for what they are in themselves, because they are a part of God's creation."

For these ideas and their contribution to progress in religion, Rolston earned yesterday what is known as the world's most generous award.

As the recipient of this year's Templeton Prize for Progress Toward Research or Discoveries about Spiritual Realities, Rolston will be awarded the sum of \$1,138,000 from the prize's foundation, which was started by Sir John Templeton, an American businessman who made a fortune in the stock market. Former recipients of the award include Mother Theresa, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, and Charles Colson.

Sir John says Rolston's article is still an important milestone, one that effectively launched environmental ethics as a philosophical inquiry. "The discipline has

since become inseparable from his name," says Templeton. "His is a career of remarkable accomplishments."

But Rolston says he is interested in the award only insofar as it furthers the ideas he has championed for more than three decades — applying religious teachings and ethics to environmental conservation.

Rolston's unique mix of expertise in religion, science, and nature began in the Shenandoah Valley, where his father worked as a pastor. After earning his bache-



REVOLUTIONARY PHILOSOPHER: Holmes Rolston III is this year's winner of the Templeton Prize.

lor's degree in physics from Davidson College, in Davidson, N.C., Rolston immediately began to pursue a religious education, eventually earning a PhD in theology and religious studies from the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. He served as a minister for several years before returning to school, where he earned a master's of philosophy of science degree from the University of Pittsburgh in 1968. He then joined the philosophy department of Colorado State University in Fort Collins, where he has worked ever since. During that time, Rolston has written numerous books and articles challenging traditional barriers between science, religion, and nature.

Since the publication of his first article, Rolston has been developing and refining these ideas — continuing to find connections between science, nature, and God. Think of it as Billy Graham (another Templeton prize recipient) chaining himself to a tree.

Sound wild? Rolston likes to think so. He describes himself as a philosopher gone wild, in the

best sense of the word. And some of his ideas have stirred enormous controversy in the scientific and religious communities. One such idea, "cruciform naturalism," was described in his 1987 book, "Science and Religion: A Critical Survey."

To illustrate the concept, Rolston points to the Bible's 23rd Psalm. "You have green pastures in the valley of the shadow of death," he says. "Boy, that's pretty good biology: the idea that life is a gift, but is perpetually regenerated in the shadow of the valley of death. I think that this element of struggle fits into a larger picture of death and rebirth, what I call life persisting in the midst of its perpetual perishing. That seems to be another way of looking at Darwinism."

But Rolston says there is more to life than ethics and philosophy. Nature, he says smiling, is to be experienced and enjoyed. And he has practiced what he preaches. Rolston has visited and lectured on every continent, including Antarctica. He says that he never ceases to marvel at the diversity and beauty of the creatures and plants he sees. "When you encounter nature, you have a sense of fundamental sources, you have a sense of the depth of being," he says. "You have a sense of the mystery of creation."

Rolston sees this mystery and beauty everywhere. He describes watching three lions sink their jaws into a zebra on the planes of Africa as a religious experience. "They stalked from different directions and the skills they had were just amazing," says Rolston. "Then the mothers and their cubs began to eat. That sort of puts you right in the middle of the way life works."

When asked about the future and the direction in which the world is headed, Rolston describes himself as a cautious optimist. He worries about global warming and an imbalance of resources, but points to the Endangered Species Act, the Wilderness Act, and cleaner air and water as real progress.

To encourage the continuation of this progress and of his ideas, Rolston is donating all his prize money to Davidson College to endow a chair for a scholar in religion and science. "Davidson is where I got started 50 years ago," Rolston recalls. "I'd like to see students 50 years from now still thinking about these issues."