

Friends and believers bid farewell to Nobel laureate

London. Religion and science blended seamlessly last Monday, 25 November, when, in an apparently unique event for a Nobel science prizewinner, tens of thousands of people gathered in the north Pakistan town of Rabwah to honour the physicist Abdus Salam, who died on 21 November.

Salam, who was 70, had been ill for more than a decade. His body was brought to a mosque in London from his house in Oxford, and flown to Lahore on 23 November. It was then taken by road for burial in Rabwah, near Salam's birthplace. Rabwah is the capital of Pakistan's Ahmadiyya community, a controversial and much-persecuted religious minority of which Salam was a member.

Salam was considered an icon and role model among his fellow Ahmadis, and his grave is expected to become a popular shrine. "When people would visit him, they would kiss his hands," says one prominent community member. "To some, he was like a God."

Salam's passions were divided between theoretical physics, religion, Pakistan and the developing world. Last week, tributes flowed from all four, as well as from the Italian town of Trieste, where Salam was founding director of the International Centre for Theoretical Physics, an institution designed to benefit third world scientists. "This is surely the end of an era," says Luciano Bertocchi, deputy director of the centre.

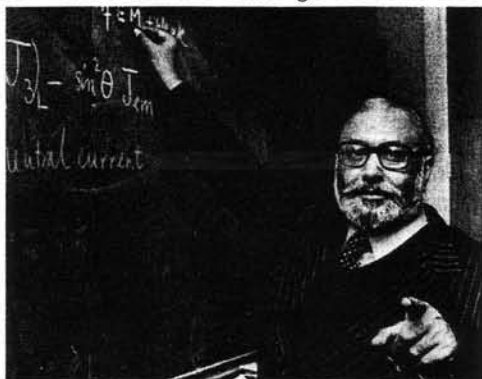
Salam shared the 1979 Nobel physics prize with Sheldon Glashow and Steven Weinberg for unifying electromagnetism and the weak nuclear force. Tom Kibble, professor in the theoretical physics department at Imperial College, London, places Salam among "the first rank of physicists, if you exclude Einstein and Dirac". Kibble joined this department in 1959, two years after it was established by Salam.

Salam remains the only scientist from a Muslim country to have won a Nobel prize. To him, science and faith were inseparable, and he would frequently urge religious leaders to become knowledgeable about science. In a sermon broadcast by satellite on 22 November, Mirza Tahir Ahmad, the head of the Ahmadiyya movement, recalled a discussion in which the Nobel laureate tried to convince Tahir that the speed of light cannot be exceeded. "I told Salam I found this hard to believe as nothing is impossible for God. But he wouldn't have it and drew lots of circles and complicated equations to try and change my mind."

But Salam also suffered for his beliefs in Pakistan, where he was branded an apostate. Followers of Salam's Ahmadiyya faith were

declared 'beyond the pale of Islam' by an international panel of Muslim jurists in 1974. Ahmadis differ from Muslims in believing that the second coming of Christ happened in India nearly a century ago.

Salam felt compelled to resign his post as Pakistan's chief scientific adviser in protest following a wave of anti-Ahmadiyya demonstrations. Later governments have



Salam: loyal Pakistani despite falling out of favour.

shied away from mentioning him too often in public to avoid any potential public and political backlash.

In anticipation of potential crowd trouble — which did not develop — security was tight at Salam's funeral. Unmarked police cars accompanied the procession, and plainclothes members of Pakistan's security forces mingled with the crowds.

The Pakistan government has always denied closing the door on Salam, or precipitating his leaving the country in 1974. The former president, General Zia ul Haq, rolled out the red carpet when Salam returned for a visit after winning the Nobel prize. Tributes to Salam following his death came from the current president, Farooq Leghari, and the newly-installed caretaker prime minister, Malik Meraj Khalid.

Salam never publicly criticized the government and insisted on retaining Pakistani citizenship. This continued commitment to Pakistan baffled many, including some of his Pakistani colleagues. "I have never been able to understand why he was so dedicated to this country when he was virtually ostracized here, being an Ahmadi," says Pervez Hoodbhoy, professor of physics at the Quaid-i-Azam University in Islamabad.

"Salam was never embittered and never gave up trying to do what he could for this country," Hoodbhoy adds. Salam's family say they have not yet decided what to do with his archive. But plans are being discussed to put a biography on the Internet.

Ehsan Masood

An obituary of Abdus Salam will appear in a future issue.