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Hillsdale College Professor Launches \$2M Research Project

Templeton Grant aims at creating Experimental Philosophy of Religion subfield

Hillsdale, Mich. — Dr. Ian Church, assistant professor of philosophy at Hillsdale College, has received a three-year, \$2.3-million grant from the John Templeton Foundation that aims to establish experimental philosophy of religion as a new, authentic area of research.

Church is the principal investigator of the project, titled “Launching Experimental Philosophy of Religion,” which will run from Sept. 1, 2021, through August 2024. The research grant is the largest a Hillsdale College professor has ever received.

“Hillsdale College is one of the best places in the country when it comes to supporting projects like this,” said Church. “We have received a tremendous amount of institutional support; the project simply wouldn’t have been possible without it.”

According to Church, the aim of the project is to kick-start broader, interdisciplinary research in experimental philosophy of religion — the project of taking some of the tools and conceptual resources of experimental philosophy, psychology, and cognitive science and applying them to seminal issues within philosophy of religion, such as the problem of evil, the cosmological argument, and the epistemic status of religious belief.

“Applying empirical tools to questions in philosophy isn’t anything new,” said Church. “Experimental philosophy has roots in figures like Aristotle and Locke; however, over the past 20 or so years, the field has really blossomed — shedding new light on major issues within contemporary epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics.”

“But strangely,” Church continued, “very little work in contemporary experimental philosophy has been done on issues within philosophy of religion. This is especially bizarre given the renaissance of activity we’ve seen in philosophy of religion in the past 50 years. This project aims to fill this gap in the academic literature.”

The research project funds six sub-grants of around \$250,000 apiece and includes seven teams of scholars representing leading figures within experimental philosophy as well as leading philosophers of religion.

Hillsdale College's project team includes Church; Blake McAllister, assistant professor of philosophy; and Dr. Justin Barrett of President Blueprint 1543 and honorary professor of the sciences and theology at the University of St Andrews. Paul Rezkalla, who completed his Ph.D. in philosophy at Florida State University this June, will also join the Hillsdale College team this fall as the Arete Professorial Fellow.

"Given the lineup across the seven teams, we're extremely optimistic that the 'Launching Experimental Philosophy of Religion' project really could usher in 'experimental philosophy of religion' as a bona fide area of research, with an enduring positive impact," said Church. "Hillsdale will be the epicenter for a new area of scholarly research."

Church previously worked on a Templeton grant titled "The Problem of Evil in Experimental Philosophy of Religion," which laid the groundwork for this project by studying whether experimental philosophy of religion could work as a new field of study. "Launching Experimental Philosophy of Religion" will build on those findings.

The grant will fund three to four undergraduate assistants at Hillsdale College, several undergraduate research projects, six virtual workshops with top scholars, a seminar in spring 2024, numerous scholarly articles and monographs on the project theme, and a capstone conference that will aim to disseminate research and build connections for future research beyond the life of the project. The conference will take place at Hillsdale College's new [Blake Center for Faith and Freedom in Somers, Connecticut](#). All lectures will be recorded and made available to the general public.

The Templeton Foundation awarded 31 other grants in 2020. Learn more about the John Templeton Foundation [here](#) and more about Church's grant [here](#).

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About Hillsdale College

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