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Professor Concludes Research Project “Launching Experimental Philosophy of Religion”

HILLSDALE, Mich. — Associate Professor of Philosophy Ian Church has concluded a three-year project aiming to establish experimental philosophy of religion as a new, authentic area of research. The project was funded by a \$2.3 million grant from the John Templeton Foundation, the largest research grant a Hillsdale College professor has ever received.

Church was the principal investigator of the project, titled “Launching Experimental Philosophy of Religion,” which ran from Sept. 1, 2021, through August 2024.

The project aimed to kick-start interdisciplinary research in experimental philosophy of religion, which takes some of the empirical tools of experimental philosophy, psychology, and cognitive science and applies them to issues within philosophy of religion, such as the problem of evil, the cosmological argument, and the epistemic status of religious belief.

“Although experimental philosophy is nothing new, researchers in just the last 20 years or so have used empirical tools to shed new light on some major philosophical questions,” Church said. “We’ve also seen a renaissance of activity within philosophy of religion in the last 50 years, but surprisingly, very little recent work in experimental philosophy has dealt with issues within philosophy of religion. This project seeks to bring these two fields together.”

The grant funded sub-grants for six teams of scholars including leading figures within experimental philosophy as well as leading philosophers of religion. Each team researched a question related to experimental philosophy of religion. A seventh team, led by Hillsdale College, led the project while also completing its own research.

Hillsdale College’s project team included Church; Associate Professor of Philosophy Blake McAllister; Justin Barrett, president of Blueprint 1543 and honorary professor of theology and the sciences at the University of St Andrews; Arete Professorial Fellows Paul Rezkalla and Jim Spiegel; Project Administrator Cindy Hoard; and over a dozen undergraduate research assistants. Several of these research assistants went on to be accepted to top graduate programs in

philosophy, including the University of Pittsburgh, Notre Dame, and the University of Southern California.

“It’s been a tremendous honor to be the principal investigator for this project,” Church said. “Hillsdale is the epicenter for a new area of research that we hope will lead a generation of academic researchers to investigate important questions in a new way.”

The grant also funded several undergraduate research projects at Hillsdale College, six virtual workshops with top scholars, a mid-point conference in summer 2024 at the Center for Philosophy of Science at the University of Pittsburgh, numerous scholarly articles and monographs on the project theme, and a capstone conference to disseminate research findings and build connections for future research. The capstone conference took place at Hillsdale College’s Blake Center for Faith and Freedom in Somers, Connecticut.

Among the papers produced through this project are the following:

Nick Byrd, Stephen Stich, and Justin Sytsma, “Analytic Atheism & Analytic Apostasy Across Cultures,” *Religious Studies* (forthcoming).

Johan De Smedt and Helen De Cruz, “The Restaurant at the Beginning of the Universe: Natural Scientists on Ultimate Reality, Science, and Religion,” *Religious Studies* (forthcoming).

Blake McAllister, Ian M. Church, Paul Rezkalla, and Long Nguyen, “Empirical Challenges to the Evidential Problem of Evil,” in *Oxford Studies in Experimental Philosophy*, ed. Joshua Knobe and Shaun Nichols, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 5:185-220.

Ameni Mehrez and Edouard Machery, “Does God Know Our Future Sins?” *Religious Studies* (forthcoming).

Shaun Nichols and Justin Steinberg, “The Presumption of Compatibilism,” *Religious Studies* (forthcoming).

Scott Partington, Alejandro Vesga, and Shaun Nichols, “No brute facts: The Principle of Sufficient Reason in ordinary thought,” *Cognition* 238 (September 2023).

Michael Prinzing, David Rose, Siying Zhang, Eric Tu, Abigail Concha, Michael Rea, Jonathan Schaffer, Tobias Gerstenberg, and Joshua Knobe, “From Artifacts to Human Lives: Investigating the Domain-Generality of Judgments about Purposes,” preprint, submitted January 24, 2024, <https://osf.io/preprints/osf/7enkr>.

“Launching Experimental Philosophy of Religion” built on the findings from a previous Templeton grant, which Church worked on, titled “The Problem of Evil in Experimental Philosophy of Religion.”

To learn more about the John Templeton Foundation, click [here](#). To learn more about Church’s grant, click [here](#). To learn more about “Launching Experimental Philosophy of Religion,” click [here](#).

For photos, click [here](#).

For a high-resolution copy of the Hillsdale College clocktower logo, click [here](#).

About Hillsdale College

Hillsdale College is an independent, nonsectarian, Christian liberal arts college located in southern Michigan. Founded in 1844, the College has built a national reputation through its classical liberal arts core curriculum and its principled refusal to accept federal or state taxpayer subsidies, even indirectly in the form of student grants or loans. It also conducts an outreach effort promoting civil and religious liberty, including a free monthly speech digest, *Imprimis*, with a circulation of more than 6.6 million. For more information, visit hillsdale.edu.

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