

CALL FOR APPLICATIONS

THE PSYCHOLOGY AND THEOLOGY OF FAITH: ACADEMIC CROSS-TRAINING FOR CHRISTIAN THEOLOGIANS AND PHILOSOPHERS OF RELIGION

With the generous support of the John Templeton Foundation, the University of St. Thomas (Minnesota) announces a sub-granting competition to fund academic cross-training in the psychological sciences for scholars of Christian theology or philosophy of religion with research interests relating to religious belief or religious commitment. Six successful applicants will each receive a \$70,000 award providing the opportunity to engage in a 2-year intensive study in the psychological sciences, in order to apply and leverage insights from the psychological sciences in their work as theologians and philosophers. Applications are due on **January 23, 2023**. In what follows we provide background and further details on the project, eligibility requirements, information on the application process, selection criteria, and a timeline for decisions and events in the program.

Here and throughout we interpret “Christian theology” broadly enough to include Christian philosophy of religion as well as systematic or dogmatic theology, fundamental theology, philosophical theology, historical theology, biblical theology, moral theology, practical theology and missiological theology, but narrowly enough to exclude mere descriptive non-theological approaches to religion. By “psychological sciences” we mean to include psychology itself as well as cognate sub-disciplines such as cognitive anthropology, behavioral economics, cognitive science, and cognitive and social neuroscience.

Background and details

Christian theologians past and present have arrived at various conceptions of faith. On one prominent conception, Christian faith is a response of the whole person to God’s revelation and invitation to relationship. Accordingly, faith involves both epistemic and volitional aspects. In the terminology of Thomas Aquinas, the faith that justifies is formed faith – faith informed by charity.¹ Such faith includes not just intellectual assent to various propositions, but also trust in God and a personal commitment to God. Working from the perspective that in typical cases Christian faith involves both belief and personal commitment, we include within the scope of this call for applications both cross-training projects which engage psychological work on religious belief and cross-training projects which engage psychological work on religious commitment.

¹ See *Summa theologiae* I-II.113.4 and II-II.4.3-5. In the words of Martin Luther, “O, this faith is a living, busy, active, powerful thing! It is impossible that it should not be ceaselessly doing that which is good. It does not even ask whether good works should be done; but before the question can be asked, it has done them, and is constantly engaged in doing them. But he who does not do such works, is a man without faith” [*Preface to Romans*, 1522, quoted in Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (New York: HarperOne, 1988), p. 39].

Contemporary work in the psychological sciences has great potential to enrich theological reflection on Christian belief and Christian commitment. For the purposes of illustration and without an intention to be exhaustive, we provide a few examples:

Evangelization and catechesis. Jesus commands his followers to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20). And 1 Peter 3:15 enjoins: “Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence...”. These texts raise a natural question for the theologian interested in the handing on of religious belief and commitment: in what ways can Christians most effectively share our reasons for belief, both within the family and the wider community of believers, and with non-believers? This is in part an empirical issue, and so the theologian would likely be helped by asking such questions as: What can the psychology of religious affiliation/disaffiliation tell us about effective catechesis and evangelization? What can psychological research on parenting and child development tell us about effective transmission of faith from parents to children? What can anthropology contribute to missiology? What can we learn from psychology and behavioral economics about the role of community and relationship in supporting faith? How can religious practice support religious belief and commitment?

Doxastic voluntarism is the thesis that human beings have voluntary control over at least some of their beliefs.² According to traditional Christian teaching, faith normally involves belief and is, in certain conditions, necessary for salvation. But then traditional Christian teaching implies that either doxastic voluntarism is true or that a person’s salvation may depend upon something over which the person lacks voluntary control. A number of empirically-tractable, theologically-interesting questions surround this issue. A project examining the state of empirical evidence from the psychological sciences for or against direct doxastic voluntarism (especially as applied to religious belief) would fall squarely within the goals of our project. So too would a project that attempted to contrive new experiments that would provide better evidence for or against direct doxastic voluntarism, or a project that, using results from the psychological sciences, attempted to clarify the ways humans can, do or should exercise indirect voluntary control over their religious beliefs.

Spiritual struggles. The theme of contending with God is present in the Old Testament (Genesis 32:22-32 and Job), and the New Testament includes the story of a man who exclaims to Jesus, “I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24). Spiritual trials, doubts and conflicts are not uncommon among believers, and the theologian will want to know how such spiritual struggles can best be approached as opportunities for developing a deeper or more authentic relationship with God. But psychological research has been conducted relevant to this very issue.

² Direct doxastic voluntarism is the claim that for at least some propositions and some times, whether a human being believes a certain proposition *p* is within his or her direct voluntary control, i.e. the person can either choose to believe *p*, or not, and depending on the person’s choice, the belief (or lack thereof) will immediately follow. Indirect doxastic voluntarism, by contrast, is the claim that for at least some propositions, whether or not a person believes a certain proposition *p* is within his or her indirect voluntary control, i.e. the person can choose to undertake a certain course of action which will likely eventually result in him or her holding the belief that *p*. Indirect doxastic voluntarism is widely accepted within the field of philosophy, but direct doxastic voluntarism is a matter of controversy. We rely here on Rico Vitz, “Doxastic Voluntarism,” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <<https://iep.utm.edu/doxastic-voluntarism/>>

Other examples of topics falling within the scope of this project include: empirically-informed philosophical or theological analysis of the nature of religious belief; theological reflection on the nature or normative appraisal of psychological factors affecting the formation or maintenance of religious belief or commitment; the empirically and theologically informed assessment of the psychological presuppositions of Pascal's Wager; and the experience of nature and natural beauty as a source of belief in God.

Accordingly, we invite applications from scholars with an interest in bringing to bear the results and/or methodology of psychological science on topics in Christian theology relating to religious belief or religious commitment.

Selected applicants, together with project leaders Michael Rota (University of St. Thomas) and Elizabeth Jackson (Toronto Metropolitan University), will form the St. Thomas Working Group on the Psychology and Theology of Faith, and will engage in a two-year period of cross-training involving the following activities:

- (a) In spring 2023, choose a mentor from the psychological sciences, and under the guidance of that mentor and the project team, design a cross-training program for AY 2023-2024 and AY 2024-2025.
- (b) In summer 2023, participate in an online launch event to get to know the other members of the Working Group and their mentors.
- (c) During AY 2023-2024, take at least three courses (undergraduate or graduate) in the psychological sciences, at least two of which focus on methods (e.g. one statistics class and one methods course), and at least one of which focuses on topical content (e.g. a broad introductory course, or a social psychology course, etc.). In the event that the applicant already possesses the knowledge and skills to be gained from any of the courses specified above, another appropriate course should be taken.
- (d) Throughout AY 2023-2024, meet with their mentors (virtually or in-person) for at least 1.5 hours a month to discuss their studies.
- (e) Attend the project's summer seminar at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota, July 8 - 13, 2024. Confirmed speakers are Peter Hill (Biola), Miguel Farias (Coventry), Julie Exline (Case Western Reserve), Tanya Luhrmann (Stanford), Rebekah Richert (UC-Riverside), and Sam Hardy (BYU).
- (f) In AY 2024-2025, take two one-semester long directed readings with their mentor, meeting with the mentor (virtually or in-person) for at least an hour every two weeks, and initiate a science-engaged theological research project relating to religious belief or commitment.
- (g) Attend the annual Mid-Year Conference of Division 36 (Society for the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality) of the American Psychological Association in Spring 2025.

- (h) Attend the project's one-week long summer workshop at the University of St. Thomas in June or July 2025 (exact dates to be determined), at which each member of the Working Group will present on his or her research project and receive feedback from the group. It is not expected that members of the Working Group will have polished publishable papers (or books, or grant proposals) by this point, but it is expected that they will have either drafts of such, or clear research ideas and plans which will plausibly lead to a strong submittable manuscript or proposal within a year.

The Working Group will also be divided into 3 smaller peer research groups, which will meet virtually once a month during the academic year (in both AY 2023-2024 and AY 2024-2025). It is expected that all members of the Working Group will engage in the training activities outlined above. They are also welcome, but not required or expected, to include in their training plans other suitable activities, such as joining a research lab, helping to design and run a study, or co-authoring with a scholar from the psychological sciences.

Eligibility requirements

- (a) Applicants should be tenured or tenure-track faculty, limited-term full-time faculty, or postdoctoral fellows in a department (or school) of philosophy, theology, or religious studies, who work in an area of Christian theology (broadly defined, as above). Faculty at seminaries as well as colleges, graduate schools and universities are eligible.
- (b) Applicants need not be employed at educational institutions in the USA, but must be fluent in English.

We strongly encourage applications from individuals who have not previously received support from science-engaged theology projects funded by the John Templeton Foundation.

Application procedure and deadline

Applications should be submitted by email to mwrota@stthomas.edu, by January 23, 2023, with "Academic Cross-Training" in the subject line of the email. Please attach to the email the following five documents:

- (a) A statement of interest explaining the applicant's interest in and fit with the project. In this statement applicants should articulate the topic(s) or research question(s) that they think cross-training in the psychological sciences would help them address. What is the applicant interested in gaining from cross-training, and how does he or she foresee using that training in the service of a science-engaged theological research project relating to religious belief or religious commitment? The statement should also include any information the applicant wishes to share about his or her qualifications for the project. (Word limit: 500 words.)
- (b) A provisional budget specifying how the \$70,000 sub-grant (to be paid to the applicant's institution) will be spent. Possible categories for direct costs include: course releases

(teaching buyouts), a stipend for the mentor, books or scholarly articles, summer salary, travel, lodging and meals (e.g. for travel to a conference, or meeting with the mentor in person if the mentor is remote). A travel allowance and food & lodging costs for the 2024 summer seminar, the Division 36 conference, and the 2025 workshop will be provided by the University of St. Thomas and so do not need to be included in the budget for the \$70,000 sub-grant award. Members of the Working Group will also receive from the University of St. Thomas an honorarium of \$1000 for participation in the summer seminar and an honorarium of \$1000 for participation in the workshop. Indirect costs (or overhead) in the sub-grant award budget are limited to 10% of direct costs, with the result that the maximum amount of indirect costs for the applicant's institution is \$6,364.

- (c) Applicant's CV
- (d) Writing sample
- (e) Statement of support from department chair or dean

Selection criteria

The selection panel will use the following two criteria to make their decisions:

- (a) Research potential, judged primarily by evaluation of the applicant's research to date, but with some weight given to academic background and current position. (Applicants will not be expected to have done previous work in science-engaged theology.)
- (b) Fit of research interests with the goals of the project.

Timeline

Jan 23, 2023	Applications due
Feb 20, 2023	Selection decisions announced
Spring 2023	Identification of mentor and design of cross-training plan
June 14, 2023	Online launch event
Sept 1, 2023	Sub-grants begin
July 8 - 13, 2024	Summer seminar at the University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, MN
Peter Hill:	General introduction to the psychology of religion The affective basis of religion Measurement in the psychology of religion
Miguel Farias:	Evolutionary theories of religion

	Motivational and emotional sources of religious belief The replicability crisis and the generalizability problem
Julie Exline:	Spiritual struggles Supernatural attributions
Tanya Luhrmann:	The connection between religious practice and religious belief and commitment
Rebekah Richert:	Handing on religious faith from parents to children
Sam Hardy:	Religious deidentification/identification in adolescents and young adults How to review and interpret primary literature in the psychological sciences
Spring 2025 [Exact date TBD]	Mid-Year Conference of Division 36 (Society for the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality) of the American Psychological Association
[June or July 2025 Exact date TBD]	Summer workshop at the University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, MN
July 31, 2025	Sub-grant end dates