

Orthodoxy and Science

Templeton Grant

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The John Templeton Foundation (<http://www.templeton.org/>) has awarded a grant to the University of South Carolina to pursue the relationship between science and Orthodox religion in North America. This planning grant seeks to establish a North American Network of interested academics and clergy approaching science and religion from an Orthodox Christian perspective. The focus of the planning grant is to identify interested individuals, establish links with the Eastern Orthodox Church in North America, catalyze scholarship and publications, and begin to establish a not-for-profit institute with a website and mailing list.

The Principal Investigator of the project is Daniel Buxhoeveden and the Co-Principal Investigator is Dennis Poole, both at the University of South Carolina. Gayle Woloschak of Northwestern University is a collaborator in the project as well.

Buxhoeveden is a biological anthropologist with a specialty in hominid brain evolution, especially the micro-vertical organization of the neocortex. He has published numerous peer reviewed papers in major neuroscience journals and has taught courses on hominid evolution and brain evolution. Buxhoeveden also has been co-investigator of numerous NIH-funded projects and private grants to study the micro-vertical organization of the cortex in schizophrenia, autism, and comparative neurology. He is founder and director of the Religion and Science Initiative at the University of South Carolina, and has created and taught courses on the topic of religion and science in the Honors College. Buxhoeveden recently received a grant from the Virginia Farah Foundation to write a book with Gayle Woloschak and other scholars on Science and the Orthodox Church.

Dennis Poole is Dean and Professor in the College of Social Work at the University of South Carolina. A scholar in the applied sciences, Dean Poole has authored or co-authored six books and numerous scholarly peer-reviewed papers in prominent academic journals. He has been the editor-in-chief of a leading academic journal and has served on editorial boards and review committees of several academic journals. He has also been principal investigator or co-investigator of federal, state, local, and foundation-funded projects. Dean Poole is co-director of the Religion and Science Initiative at the University of South Carolina.

Gayle Woloschak is Director of the Zygon Center in Chicago. Among Orthodox scholars in North America, she has led and organized student groups, public events and talks,

seminars, conferences, and workshops on the topic of religion and science. She has also served on numerous committees in the Orthodox Church, and has extensive contacts with major figures in religion and science throughout the world. She is also Professor of Radiology and Cell and Molecular Biology at the Feinberg School of Medicine. Prior to her appointment at Northwestern University, she served as Senior Molecular Biologist in the Bioscience Division of Argonne National Laboratory and Senior Fellow of the Nanosciences Consortium of Argonne National Laboratory-University of Chicago.

Interest in religion and science dialogue is growing, as witnessed by the rise of centers, institutes, and programs in academic centers devoted to this topic. This dialogue has become a forum where scientists, theologians, and other academic scholars in diverse fields engage in discussions related to the interface of science and religion. The goal of these initiatives is well expressed by Eric Weislogel, Director of the Local Societies Initiative of the Metanexus Institute in Philadelphia, who defined the dialogue in this manner:

Science and religion are two main paths we human beings have taken in our efforts to know and understand ourselves, our communities, and our cosmos. The religion-and-science movement is not (or ought not to be) attempting to develop some new academic discipline; rather, the community of scholars and religious practitioners engaged in it are helping us all to re-learn the art of "seeing the forest for the trees," helping us to transcend (while respecting) the various academic disciplines to reach toward unity of knowledge, a trans-disciplinary integral wisdom. The movement is attempting to mitigate the deleterious effects of our "analytic obsession" in our pursuit of knowledge. While respecting the power and success of our methodology of breaking all of reality into smaller and smaller bits in order better to know it, the religion-and-science dialogue is attempting to provide a complementary mechanism for synthesis in thought and understanding. [Available at http://marty-enter.uchicago.edu/sightings/archive_2005/0106.shtml]

Because of the limited visibility of Orthodox theology in the dialogue on religion and science, most discussions are approached from a Western theological perspective. Eastern Orthodox perspective is assumed to be the same, or it is not referred to at all in the dialogue. Prominent Western Christian scholars usually anchor their positions on assumptions and theological traditions stemming from the works of St. Augustine or the reformers. The Eastern Orthodox tradition affords a fresh approach to the dialogue, and provides a dynamic way to engage science that avoids reactionary fundamentalism.

Beginning in 2004, the John Templeton Foundation generously provided a series of grants to organizations in the country of Romania to bring the Orthodox Church into the dialogue. The result has been the formation of the ADSTR (*The Association for the Dialogue between Science and Theology in Romania*) and other organizations throughout Romania. They have held international congresses that attract Orthodox academics from many nations. This has made Romania and parts of Eastern Europe more actively involved in the religion and science dialogue than Orthodox scholars and clergy in North America. While not aligning ourselves directly with the Romanian model,

we seek to replicate the broad aims of that project focused on research, education, scholarship, and dissemination, in the context of the Orthodox Church as it exists in North America.

We seek to assist Orthodox Christians in arriving at a more educated understanding of scientific information, what it is and what it is not, and how to relate it to Eastern Orthodox traditions. We want to avoid reactionary fundamentalism on the one hand, while also rejecting a naïve acceptance of all things scientific on the other. We also seek to promote and encourage the dialogue between religion and science throughout North America, so that religion and science stay in communication with each other, even when it is difficult to do so. Orthodox Christianity has been notably absent from the analysis of modern science due to historical, political, and geographic circumstances, but there is no reason why it cannot fully engage this topic now.

Due to the nascent stage of Orthodox religion and science in North America, it is necessary to accomplish certain goals before attempting larger projects. We hope to establish a long term commitment with the Orthodox Churches found in North America. In light of this, the goals of our first project are to (1) recruit a core group of Pan-Orthodox academics and clergy to provide support and input, (2) disseminate and promote the project idea throughout different layers of the Orthodox Church, (3) identify research interests and concerns among Orthodox scholars and clergy in North America, (4) establish an institute that will be the catalyst to move ahead with religion and science initiatives while also acting as a visible center for this activity in North America, and (5) determine the level of material support we can expect from institutions within and outside the Orthodox Church to ensure the long term success of this effort.

Orthodox religion and science as a field of exploration is relatively new in North America, both in the academy and among clergy. No one should be discouraged from participating in the dialogue with us because they do not have much expertise on the topic. This is a forum for learning and exploration. Dialogue on religion and science is an extremely broad topic and can be approached from various disciplines, including the basic, behavioral, and social sciences, as well as philosophy, history, and any number of others fields that may have an impact on how Orthodoxy and science relate in the present, how they did in the past, and how they might in the future. We invite members of OTSA who have an interest in participating with us in the dialogue to contact Daniel Buxhoeveden at buxhoeve@mailbox.sc.edu. In the near future we will be aiming at engaging in specific topic areas, encouraging research and publications in peer reviewed journals of religion and science, and working towards a larger project that would entail a national conference. We also envision that members will attend international conferences on religion and science where they can bring the Orthodox perspective to a larger audience and encourage and support each other. As part of this grant we will be creating a website and a mailing list. Anyone who wishes to be on the mailing list can let me know by contacting me at the above email.