

## ***Varieties of Understanding: New Perspectives from Psychology, Philosophy, and Theology***

### **Request for Proposals: “New Perspectives on the Theology of Understanding”**

#### **Fellowship Announcement**

Fordham University, with the support of a generous grant from The John Templeton Foundation, invites proposals for the “New Perspectives on the Theology of Understanding” funding initiative. Our aim is to encourage research from both new and established scholars working on the notion of understanding in theology and religion. We anticipate applications from scholars working in theology, religious studies, and the philosophy of religion, but welcome applications on this topic from other fields as well. Interdisciplinary teams that include members from other areas, especially psychology, are encouraged but not required.

#### **Fellowship Description**

Theology Fellowship Director: Gordon Graham, Princeton Theological Seminary

Varieties of Understanding Project Director: Stephen Grimm, Fordham University

This \$250,000 RFP is intended to support work in theology and related areas on the nature and varieties of religious understanding. Proposals can request between \$40,000 and \$100,000 for projects not to exceed one year in duration. We intend to make 3-4 awards.

#### **Background and Key Questions**

The great Christian philosopher and theologian of the eleventh century Saint Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) famously had as his motto *fides quaerens intellectum*—“faith seeking understanding.” But what sort of understanding is it that faith seeks? More exactly, how does the understanding sought by the theologian or religious believer differ from the understanding sought in other areas, such as science or philosophy?

One common claim is that different conditions need to be met to achieve religious understanding. St. Augustine, for example, frequently insisted “unless you believe you will not understand,” suggesting that religious understanding is only open to those who make a certain act of faith or personal commitment. Others have claimed that religious understanding is only open to those who undertake certain types of religious practice—a claim that finds interesting empirical support from studies tying openness to religious understanding to the practice of prayer or meditation. Finally, it is often said that only those with a certain moral character are able to achieve spiritual understanding or insight—for example, in the Buddhist tradition it is claimed that the highest form of understanding or wisdom is only available to the morally virtuous.

There is also a lively debate about the very project of trying to achieve religious understanding. If, as the book of Isaiah claims, God's ways are not our ways, then how is religious understanding even possible? The tradition of negative or apophatic theology answers that our understanding of God can only be indirect, or that our theological concepts tell us more about what God is not than about what God is. But how can this be squared with the idea of revelation or scripture, in which God seems to disclose a great deal about his goals, intentions, and concerns?

A final issue concerns theology's role in producing an integrated understanding of the world, especially in the context of universities. According to the medieval idea, theology is the queen of the sciences, the discipline that reveals how the various areas within the university are connected or fit together. But how plausible is that idea today, even within denominational settings, and how does theology's ability to integrate different disciplines compare with the ability of various secular alternatives (such as physics)?

In light of these pressing issues in theology, we call for proposals addressing at least one of the following **Key Questions**:

1. In what ways is religious understanding distinct from, or similar to, understanding in other domains (such as science or philosophy)?
2. What are the prerequisites for religious understanding? For example, in order to achieve religious understanding is it necessary to engage in a certain spiritual practice, or to have a certain moral character, or to make a special act of will?
3. Do metaphor, analogy, and symbolic representation play a special role in religious understanding? If so, in what way?
4. How does the understanding expressed in liturgical practices and ritual acts differ from the understanding offered by systematic theology?
5. What consequences does negative or apophatic theology have for our understanding of God? In what ways is God intelligible, on this view, and in what ways is God not?
6. How does the concept of revelation relate to religious understanding? Which theories of interpretation are most appropriate to understanding scripture?
7. Where does theology stand in relation to other intellectual disciplines? How plausible is theology's claim to provide an integrated understanding of the world and thus to be the "queen of the sciences"?
8. Are there significant differences in types of understanding among different religions (Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, etc.)?

## **The Concept of Understanding**

Theologians and philosophers have defined the term “understanding” in many ways, with no universal agreement as to its meaning. However, one common approach has been to note that understanding is a cognitive accomplishment of some kind, not to be confused with the mere *feeling* of understanding (such as we find in the *Aha!* experience). Along the same lines, others have argued that understanding requires richer or more complex cognitive abilities than we find in standard instances of knowledge. Thus one can come to know basic facts about one’s environment simply by opening one’s eyes; to understand why things are the way they are requires something further.

We will give special attention to projects that attempt to articulate what this “something further” might amount to, especially as it pertains to religious understanding. However, because we acknowledge the diversity of approaches in contemporary theology, we realize that some projects may have different conceptual starting points. Thus, we strongly welcome applications from a variety of different perspectives. If a project does have a different conceptual starting point, however, we ask that this be noted and briefly justified in the application.

For further information about how the notion of understanding is conceived in the Varieties of Understanding project, along with information about the “Big Questions” that guide the project overall, please consult the project website at [www.varietiesofunderstanding.com](http://www.varietiesofunderstanding.com).

## **Application Instructions**

Letters of Intent are due by November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013. Invitations for full proposals will be made by December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013. Full proposals will be due by March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014, with final award decisions issued by April 15<sup>th</sup>, 2014, for research to begin between July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014 and August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014.

### ***Letter of Intent (LOI) Stage – all materials must be received by November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013***

Applicants are required to submit:

1. A letter of intent that includes the central questions of the project, the background and significance of the questions, the way in which the project addresses the goals and at least one of the Key Questions of this RFP, and a summary of the methodology. The letter cannot exceed 1,500 words (excluding references).
2. A complete curriculum vitae for the PI and for all major team members (if applicable).

Application materials should be submitted by e-mail attachment as a single document to EMAIL, with “Theology LOI” in the subject line. The only acceptable file formats are .doc and PDF. Questions about the application process can be sent to the same address.

### ***Full Proposal Stage – all materials must be received by March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014***

Those applicants who are invited to submit full proposals must include:

1. A **cover letter** of no more than 1 page with the title, amount requested, duration of the project (not to exceed one year), and team members (if applicable).
2. A **brief abstract** of the proposed work of no more than 150 words.
3. A **narrative description** of the work to be carried out, not to exceed 5,000 words (excluding references). The description should explain the central questions of the project, the background and significance of the questions, the way in which the project addresses the goals and at least one of the Key Questions of this RFP, the methodology, the researchers' qualifications to conduct the research, and plans for the dissemination of research outputs. If the proposed work requires access to particular equipment or populations, the researcher(s) should indicate how they will access these resources during the proposed funding period.
4. A **project summary** of up to 500 words which explains the project and its significance to non-academics, and which would be published on The Varieties of Understanding website and possibly in Templeton materials, and included in publicity materials if the proposal is funded.
5. A **time line** for the proposed work.
6. A detailed **budget** with accompanying narrative explaining line items, totaling between \$40,000 and \$100,000 in direct + indirect costs. Overhead is limited to 15%, and funds cannot be used for major equipment purchases.
7. **Approval** of the Dept. Chair and University Signing Officials.

Full proposals should be submitted by e-mail attachment to [theology@varietiesofunderstanding.com](mailto:theology@varietiesofunderstanding.com) (questions about full proposals can be sent to the same address). The words "Theology Full Proposal" should appear in the e-mail subject line. The required documents should be compiled into a single file in the order listed above. The only acceptable file formats are .doc and PDF. Full proposals will be accepted only from applicants who have been invited to submit by the fellowship directors, on the basis of the LOI phase.

### **Review and Selection Process**

Letters of Intent will be reviewed by the fellowship director, the project leader, and other fellowship directors associated with the project. Full Proposals will be reviewed by a panel of external expert referees. If a proposal involves content or methods for which these reviewers do not have adequate expertise, additional ad hoc reviews may be sought.

Selection criteria will include: (1) significance of the proposed work, including both theoretical and practical benefits, (2) novelty and creativity of the ideas and methods, (3) appropriateness and promise of the proposed methods, (4) qualifications of the researcher or research team, (5) potential for interdisciplinary insight and contributions, and (6) relevance of the proposed work to the RFP goals.

## Grant Eligibility and Requirements

The PI must have a Ph.D. and be in or contracted to a faculty position at an accredited college or university before July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014. For projects involving human subjects or non-human animals, appropriate approval for the proposed research must be obtained from an Internal Review Board before the start date for research. Applicants can have their name on only one proposal for this competition. All applications must be submitted in English and all payments will be made in US dollars. Non-U.S. residents are eligible for all awards.

Projects which are primarily historical in focus will not be funded.

Funded projects must have their PI commit to the following:

- 1) Submit interim and final reports, as well as interim and final expenditure reports. The interim and final reports should not exceed 5 pages, and should detail the outcomes of the funded project. Reports must be submitted at the end of six months and at the conclusion of the project.
- 2) Attend and present initial findings at the four-day Mid-point Conference in June of 2015 (expenses covered).
- 3) Attend and present final results at the four-day Capstone Conference in June of 2016 (expenses covered).
- 4) Consent to have their presentations at the Mid-Point Conference and Capstone Conference be videotaped for the Varieties of Understanding website.
- 5) Notify the Project at [theology@varietiesofunderstanding.com](mailto:theology@varietiesofunderstanding.com) of all conference presentations, papers, and books that arise from the funded research.
- 6) Follow stipulations of grant award as communicated by Templeton either to Fordham University or to the recipient directly, and as determined by Fordham University.

All questions should be directed to:  
[theology@varietiesofunderstanding.com](mailto:theology@varietiesofunderstanding.com)

or

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