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Grant boosts science, religion dialogue

Project focuses on the challenges posed to humanity by new advances in the life sciences, technology, and the neurosciences

Arizona State University was selected as one of only two universities in the country to receive a prestigious grant to advance the dialogue between science and religion in contemporary society. The other recipient is the State University of New York at Stony Brook.

The grant of \$500,000 is given by the Metanexus Institute on Religion and Science, a Philadelphia-based organization that advances research, education and outreach on the constructive engagement of science and religion. The Templeton Research Lectures are made possible through the generosity of the John Templeton Foundation, whose mission is to pursue new insights about the interaction of religion and science.

Hava Tirosh-Samuels, professor of history, heads ASU's initiative for 2006-09. Titled "Facing the Challenges of Transhumanism: Religion, Science, and Technology," the project is based at the Center for the Study of Religion and Conflict.

Today, science and technology are used to increase human physical and cognitive abilities in order to improve the human condition in unprecedented ways. Such advances include genomics, stem-cell research, robotics and nanotechnology. ASU's project will examine the philosophical, social, legal, political, environmental and religious implications generated by the new phase of human evolution. It will look to expand the dialogue between science and religion and illustrate how the humanities can interface with the social and natural sciences by taking into consideration the importance of culture and history.

"The new technologies bring about not only human beings with enhanced capabilities who will live longer, but also the human capacity to create other animals, including humans," Tirosh-Samuels says. "In the transhuman phase, humans become their own makers, transforming their environment and themselves. Yet many people, especially those committed to a religious outlook, recoil from the transhuman vision and find it an affront to human dignity...the belief that humans are created by God in the image of God."

The proposal received financial support from various units at ASU, including the Vice-President for Research and Economic Affairs; the Institute for Humanities Research; The Harold and Jean Grossman Chair of Jewish Studies; the Center for the Study of Religion and Conflict; the Center for Science, Public Policy, and Outcomes; Arizona Biodesign Institute, and within the College of Liberal Arts and Science the Departments of Physics and Astronomy, History, Religious Studies, Philosophy, and the Program of Jewish Studies.

The project will be administered by the Center for the Study of Religion and Conflict that has been fostering the dialogue of science and religion at ASU for the past two years as part of its mission to explore the role of religion in the public sphere. The Templeton grant will allow the center to build upon and expand this series of conversations.

Linell Cady, the center's director, says, "Conflict or compartmentalization are the primary ways in which the relationship of religion and science are envisioned today, both of which foster their isolation within the academy. The pace and degree of scientific and technological change makes this isolation increasingly problematic. This project will help to create the intellectual space in which the connections can be explored."

In addition, the grant corresponds with the work of ASU's Center of Law, Science, and Technology; the Center for Nanotechnology in Society; and the Center of Biology and Society. Faculty members from these units have participated in a faculty seminar on science and religion for the past two years.

Debra Losse, divisional dean of the humanities in the College of Arts and Sciences, praises the project and says it "uniquely advances the goals of the Institute for Humanities Research, the college, and the university by exploring the human dimensions of emerging and significant social, cultural and technological issues.

"The energy and dynamics of this important discussion will contribute to our understanding of what it means to be human in a world driven by technological advances and invite a broad range of specialists across the greater Phoenix community to participate in the dialogue," she says.

The Templeton grant is expected to enhance the rise of Arizona to become a national center for the biosciences, Tirosh-Samuelson says.

"It will demonstrate how contemporary scientific endeavors require reflections on the impact of science on the human condition, and how the humanities can interface with the social and natural sciences," she says. "The project will enable the Center for the Study of Religion and Conflict to assume a leadership role in moving beyond the perceived and mistaken notion that science and religion are necessarily in conflict."

Sharon Keeler, sharon.keeler@asu.edu
(480) 965-4012