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SSRC Announces New Grants Program: New Directions in the Study of Prayer

October 26, 2011 – The Social Science Research Council announces the launch of a major new project and grants program, **New Directions in the Study of Prayer**. The project invites proposals from scholars in all disciplines for studies that will enhance knowledge of the social, cultural, psychological, and cognitive dimensions of prayer and of its origins, variations, and correlations in human life, as well as from journalists interested in pursuing projects on these themes. Through the award of twenty to twenty-five research grants, ranging from \$50,000 to \$200,000 each, and a small number of journalism grants, of up to \$50,000 each, the project will generate innovative research on practices of prayer and foster the development of an interdisciplinary network of scholars and journalists engaged in the study of prayer.

Supported with funding from the John Templeton Foundation and developed in conjunction with the SSRC's program on Religion and the Public Sphere, New Directions in the Study of Prayer will be led by a multidisciplinary advisory committee, to be chaired by Columbia University's Courtney Bender.

“Prayer is an important practice with many meanings across diverse social and religious landscapes,” says Dr. Bender. “Too frequently this diversity has not been acknowledged, much less addressed, in scholarship on prayer, which has tended to focus on a narrow range of issues of efficacy and prayer's presumed positive value. The New Directions in the Study of Prayer program provides a new opportunity to expand social scientific understanding of prayer beyond the usual questions and the usual answers and arguments. We are seeking out scholars who bring new methods and questions to the study of prayer and its religious, social, political, and cognitive effects and who will incisively and critically expand scholarly discourse on these issues.”

Of special interest to the program are proposals for projects that will shed new light on the relationships between the practice of prayer and virtue, human flourishing, altruism, and creativity and projects that examine the cognitive aspects of prayer, the embeddedness of prayer in religious and nonreligious institutions, the social dimensions of prayer, or cultural variations in prayer across societies and religious traditions. Projects may study any religious tradition(s) or milieu(s) and focus on populations in any geographical region(s) of the world.

Proposals for the Research Initiative will be considered in four areas of inquiry: Prayer, Virtues, and Human Flourishing; Prayer in Social and Institutional Contexts; Comparative Perspectives; and Cognitive and Psychological Perspectives. Those interested in applying for the Journalism Initiative are encouraged to be creative in conceiving their projects but also to attend in some fashion to one or both of two sets of questions detailed in the Request for Proposals.

Letters of intent are due by December 1, 2011. Guidelines for LOIs are outlined in separate and detailed RFPs for researchers and journalists. For more detail on the project and links to the RFPs, visit: <http://www.ssrc.org/prayer/>.

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The John Templeton Foundation (www.templeton.org) serves as a philanthropic catalyst for discoveries relating to the Big Questions of human purpose and ultimate reality. The Foundation supports research on subjects ranging from complexity, evolution, and infinity to creativity, forgiveness, love, and free will. It encourages civil, informed dialogue among scientists, philosophers, and theologians and between such experts and the public at large, for the purposes of definitional clarity and new insights. The Foundation's vision is derived from the late Sir John Templeton's optimism about the possibility of acquiring "new spiritual information" and from his commitment to rigorous scientific research and related scholarship. The Foundation's motto, "How little we know, how eager to learn," exemplifies its support for open-minded inquiry and its hope for advancing human progress through breakthrough discoveries.

The Social Science Research Council (www.ssrc.org) is an independent nonprofit organization devoted to the advancement of social science research and scholarship. Founded in New York City in 1923 as the world's first national coordinating body of the social sciences, it is today an international resource for interdisciplinary, innovative public social science. The SSRC's program on **Religion and the Public Sphere** is dedicated to advancing and mobilizing new knowledge about religion, secularism, and public life. The program has overseen projects on religion and international affairs, spirituality and civic engagement in the United States, and the religious lives of American undergraduates. It also supports *The Immanent Frame*, a widely read collective and interdisciplinary blog on secularism, religion, and the public sphere.