

Notre Dame professor explores the science of generosity

By: Katie Spencer and Marie Blakey

Date: January 15, 2009

The University of Notre Dame has launched the Science of Generosity, a project funded by a \$5 million grant from the John Templeton Foundation to Christian Smith, the William R. Kenan Jr. Professor of Sociology and director of the University's Center for the Study of Religion and Society.

"The goal of the project is to mobilize top-quality research across various disciplines on the origins, expressions and effects of generosity," Smith said, noting that the project defines generosity as the spirit and practice of giving good things to others freely and abundantly. "This includes time, aid, attention, blood, possessions, encouragement, emotional investment and more. In countless ways, the world wants for significant growth in the virtue of giving."

The grant is one of the largest ever received by a faculty member in Notre Dame's College of Arts and Letters. Notre Dame is supporting the project with additional funding of approximately \$200,000.

"Research projects such as this that investigate broad moral questions and the common good are integral to Notre Dame's academic mission," said John McGreevy, I.A. O'Shaughnessy Dean of the College of Arts and Letters. "Just as important, Professor Smith's work will bring scholars across the country and from many disciplines into conversation on a topic of fundamental importance."

In addition to funding academic research at the University, the Science of Generosity initiative will host a competition among international scholars in fields such as sociology, economics, psychology, behavioral economics, education, law and religious studies. The first phase of the competition will award \$250,000 to \$500,000 to four to eight of the most promising research proposals. The second phase will fund a number of smaller awards, totaling another \$1.2 million.

Current academic studies on generosity are a scattered constellation of research projects operating under different terms such as philanthropy, giving, charity and altruism, Smith noted, but he anticipates a more unified field will develop around the Notre Dame initiative. To that end, he has assembled a board of advisers from experts in related fields, including William Damon, professor of education at Stanford University; Glen Elder, research professor of sociology and psychology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; William Galston, Ezra Zilkha Chair in Governance Studies at the Brookings Institution; and Jonathan Haidt, associate professor of psychology at the University of Virginia.

Smith began exploring the topic of generosity in his 2008 book, "Passing the Plate: Why American Christians Don't Give Away More Money," written with Michael Emerson and Patricia Snell. With funding from the Science of Generosity, Smith will continue his research on generosity through a sociological investigation of what causes generous and ungenerous behavior.

A primary goal of the project is to communicate research findings and information to other scholars, religious organizations, nonprofit organizations and the general public. Findings will be made available as the project develops on the project Web site: <http://generosityresearch.nd.edu>.

The project also is motivated by broader goals. In step with the mission of the foundation that bears his name, John M. Templeton Jr., son of the late Sir John Templeton, shared his dream of a worldwide "epidemic of generosity" in his book, "Thrift and Generosity." Smith said his ultimate ambition for the project is to increase generosity in the world.

Established in 1987, the John Templeton Foundation serves as a philanthropic catalyst for discovery in areas engaging life's biggest questions, ranging from explorations into the laws of nature and the universe to inquiries into the nature of love, gratitude, forgiveness and creativity. The foundation's mission is derived from founder Templeton's commitment to rigorous scientific research and related scholarship. More information is available on the Web at www.templeton.org.

Contact: Christian Smith, chris.smith@nd.edu, 574-631-4531