Global Philosophy of Religion
Fundamental Spiritual Reality, Human Purpose, and Living Well

Junior Scholar Coaching Stipends

"Global Philosophy of Religion: Fundamental Spiritual Reality, Human Purpose, and Living Well" (GPR-2), which is funded by the John Templeton Foundation, is a major international initiative to make the philosophy of religion a truly global field. The project will enhance and promote cutting-edge research on central issues in the philosophy of religion by creating opportunities for researchers representing regions of the world and religious and wisdom traditions that are currently underrepresented in Anglo-American philosophy of religion.

We offer eight stipends (£1,000 each) to pairs of a junior academic and a senior academic studying philosophy of religion. To receive the stipend, the senior academic will offer three 1-hour one-on-one coaching sessions to the junior academic. The senior academic will read and comment on the junior academic's writing and offer career advice on applying for jobs and grants, publishing papers and books, and improving teaching and presentation skills.

Applicants are required to submit the following items, written in English by the end of 30/09/2025 (BST):

- CVs of applicants (both the junior academic and senior academic)
- A proposal of up to 1,500 words addressing the following:
    - the rationale for applying for the stipend
    - description of the proposed three 1-hour coaching sessions
    - the qualifications of the applicant(s)
    - a letter from the nominated coach confirming their willingness to coach the applicant
    - a timeline

The documents should be uploaded via googleforms using the link on the relevant web page. If you have any questions, or can't access the form, please contact gpr@contacts.bham.ac.uk.

Priority will be given to scholars who work on topics directly relevant to the theme of GPR-2, especially those relating to underrepresented religious or wisdom traditions.

The eligibility criteria are as follows:

- The applicant is a PhD student or recent PhD (within the last five years) at an institution of higher education or a student or member at a comparable level at a traditional religious institution, such as a yeshiva, madrasa, or ashram.
- The three coaching sessions will be completed by 31 May 2027 without delay.

We will assess each application according to the following selection criteria:

- The quality of the proposal
- The relevance of the proposed course to the theme of GPR-2
- The applicant's achievements in research and teaching commensurate with career stage
- The expected impact the proposed training will make on the globalization and diversification of the philosophy of religion.

Our Topics

Philosophers of religion have intensively discussed core ontological claims concerning the existence or non-existence of a creator God. Traditional Abrahamic theists typically believe that the existence of such a God can be inferred from the existence of the universe and/or humans: they argue that the universe or humans could not exist if a creator God did not exist. It is as if the universe and humans would disappear if we eliminate this God from our ontology. The central thesis that we focus on in GPR-2 is analogous: traditional Abrahamic theists typically believe that there cannot be human purpose or meaning without the existence of God, so it follows that human purpose and meaning would disappear if we eliminate God from our ontology. We will examine whether such a belief about the relationship between human purpose/meaning and God makes sense.

It is important to note that this is only a simplistic illustration intended to show the distinction between ontological issues concerning the existence of God/fundamental spiritual reality, and distinct issues concerning what role, if any, the existence of God/fundamental spiritual reality plays in human purpose and meaning. There are many subtle views concerning this role. Some may argue, for instance, that the *absence* of God is necessary for human purpose and meaning. Others may argue that while the existence of God is not necessary, it still plays a certain role in axiological considerations.

Also, while the focus of the above illustration is on the concept of God in the Abrahamic traditions, our project is not limited to this specific concept; we will consider diverse forms of spiritual reality discussed in distinct traditions.

GPR-2 therefore will move beyond GPR-1 by considering not only questions about existence but also questions about meaning. This links to a new emphasis on the role of 'down-stream' religious claims in addition to core ontological ones, taking religious and spiritual practice (rituals, prayer, etc.) as philosophical lens through which to view the place of God/fundamental spiritual reality in human purpose and meaning.

The following are examples of specific questions that we intend to address in GPR-2:

- Is fundamental spiritual reality necessary for human purpose? Alternatively, does human meaning/purpose require that there is no fundamental spiritual reality? If an answer to the first question is affirmative, what kind of fundamental spiritual reality is necessary? Is it a monotheistic God, as the Abrahamic traditions assert? Is it a panentheistic God, or polytheistic gods, such as those embraced in Vedantic traditions? Or alternatively is it a spiritual entity that exists in each of us and that we have to become?
- How can religions such as Buddhism, Jainism, Confucianism and Taoism explain human purpose and meaning without appealing to a creator God or gods? Can they "replace" God

or gods with a non-personal fundamental order or principle, such as *Tao* in Taoism, *li* in Confucianism or *ātman/jīva* in Jainism?

- Religious and spiritual practice is philosophically undertheorized. What light can be shed on important religious and spiritual activity, such as rituals, by philosophical and scientific reflection? What claims are made and can we make sense of them? How do religious/spiritual practices illuminate the role of fundamental spiritual reality in our lives?
- Empirical studies find that religious people are generally happier and more optimistic than non-religious people. Does this finding suggest that religious people live better than non-religious people? These empirical studies focus mainly on followers of Abrahamic religions and their non-followers. Does the claim that religious people are happier and more optimistic apply to non-Abrahamic religions, especially religions in the East, as well? What implications do these empirical studies have for philosophical debates about the relationship between fundamental spiritual reality and human purpose/meaning?
- Is spirituality essential for human flourishing? If so, does it make sense for humanists to pursue a position described as "spiritual but not religious"? Is such a view coherent? Can we show by appealing to empirical research or philosophical argument that followers of this view can retain all pragmatic benefits of religion without embracing any supernaturalist ontology?
- How can we understand the existence of pain and suffering in life? Can we understand it by referring to supernaturalistic explanations found in traditional African religions or Shinto? Some Christians try to explain away pain and suffering by appealing to theodicies, while some Buddhists try to overcome them by relinquishing worldly attachments. Some Confucians, moreover, teach that while pain and suffering are inevitable, they can enhance human growth by promoting *rén* (humanness), *yi* (justice), or *xin* (integrity). Which approach makes the most sense?
- The practice of prayer is widespread in diverse religious traditions: it is employed to express gratitude or thanks, to engage in meditation, and to make requests to God or deities. Despite these different aims, there seems to be a consensus that the practice of prayer is an important part of spiritual life, and it can contribute to human flourishing. Is this consensus correct? Does empirical research support the claim that prayer and other religious practice can promote happiness and fulfillment?
- What is the role of reading sacred texts in fostering well-being? What are theological and anthropological implications of the primary mode of experiencing the divine via Scriptures?
- It is widely believed that the possibility or impossibility of the afterlife has significant implications for human purpose and meaning. However, different traditions have very different conceptions of the afterlife. For example, belief in reincarnation or rebirth is common in South Asian traditions, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism, while Abrahamic traditions, such as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, usually reject this notion. Also, while there seems to be a clear distinction between life and the afterlife in the Abrahamic traditions, there is no such distinction in some other traditions, such as African religions and Shinto. How can we categorize distinct models of the afterlife and examine their relationships with purpose and meaning in life?
- Many religious and wisdom traditions teach that the realization of virtues such as love, gratitude, honesty, compassion, and forgiveness is necessary for living well. Is this teaching correct? If so, how can we cultivate these virtues, especially in relation to

fundamental spiritual realities? Can we cultivate them more efficiently if we draw upon the teachings of multiple religions?

- What is the relationship between value and existence? Is value more fundamental than existence, or is existence more fundamental than value? How is an answer to these questions related to the existence or non-existence of fundamental spiritual realities?
- How can we explain the foundation of moral and spiritual growth? Do we need a universal causal law like karma, which is embraced in the Dharmic traditions, or a God as a moral law giver, as the Abrahamic traditions would insist? Or could there be an entirely naturalistic explanation for this moral foundation?
- Buddhism, Jainism, Daoism, and Confucianism are normally considered traditions that do not involve belief in deities. Is this characterization correct? How can we understand beings in these traditions, such as Bodhisattvas in Buddhism, Arhats in Jainism, Pangu in Daoism, and Tian in Confucianism? Do they play any role in human purpose and meaning? If so, how do their roles differ from deities in other traditions such as Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam?

These questions can be addressed by focusing on specific topics arising within particular traditions. The following are some examples:

- Hinduism: According to a core teaching within the Hindu tradition, we suffer and are reborn again and again so long as we remain ignorant of our true nature as eternal souls, which are akin to, or even, for some Hindu traditions, identical with, the ultimate reality (*Brahman*). Hence, the ultimate goal of life is *mokṣa*, "liberation" from the cycle of rebirth, which can only be attained through knowledge of the ultimate reality. Contrary to common caricatures of Hinduism as otherworldly, traditional Hindu scriptures hold that there are four legitimate goals in life (*puruṣārtha*s): ethical values (*dharma*), material wealth and prosperity (*artha*), sensory pleasures and enjoyments (*kāma*), and liberation (*mokṣa*). However, the pursuit of wealth and enjoyment must always be rooted in ethical living and should eventually lead to renunciation of worldly enjoyments and attachments for the sake of higher spiritual fulfilment. This spiritual-existential trajectory is reflected in the traditional Hindu scheme of four stages (*āśrama*s) in the life of an ideal Hindu: celibate student life (*brahmacarya*), the life of a married householder (*gārhasthya*), the life of a forest-dweller (*vānaprāsthya*), and the life of a monk who has renounced all worldly attachments and whose sole aim is liberation (*sannyāsa*). Numerous moral, axiological, soteriological, and scientific questions arise in this context. Can one become a monk without having been a householder first? Does liberation entail disembodiment, or can liberation occur while living in the human body? Are there ideals even greater than liberation from rebirth—for instance, the ideal of pure love for God, or choosing to be reborn again in order to help others achieve spiritual fulfilment? Which modes of life and types of spiritual practice are most conducive to the attainment of liberation? What is the mechanism by which they do so? Can empirical studies confirm the Hindu (as well as Buddhist, Jain, and Sikh) teaching that a life oriented around sense-pleasures inevitably results in frustration and suffering?
- Islam: It is said in the Quran (51: 56) that human beings are not created except to worship God. Based on this verse, many Muslims believe that worship of God is a virtue and that it is the only way we can make life meaningful. The Quran (20: 124) also insists that

whoever turns away from the remembrance of God will have a life full of suffering. These verses imply that atheists or agnostics have meaningless and miserable lives. Moreover, even believers who do not keep God in their hearts and fail to act according to God's commands are destined to suffer. However, the following observations seem to challenge these ideas: (i) there are unbelievers who apparently have lives filled with purpose and meaning, and (ii) there are practicing believers who worship and remember God but experience suffering. In response to (i), Muslim scholars usually appeal to the notion of *imlāʾ* (borrowed from the Quran 3: 178) or its Quranic synonyms (e.g., *fitna* and *imtiḥān*), and in response to (ii), they usually appeal to the notion of *ibtilāʾ* (borrowed from the Quran 2: 155-157) or its Quranic synonyms (e.g., *istidrāj*). Roughly speaking, *imlāʾ* is a tradition according to which God allows health and wealth to sinners: God does not punish the sinners immediately because God wants to remove all the excuses that they could have about their difficulties in life and lack of time for repentance. *Ibtilāʾ* refers to the challenges that God creates to test our faith and devotion to God. But are these explanations tenable? What do they tell us about the pursuit of human purpose and meaning in the Islamic tradition? How do they compare with explanations found in other Abrahamic and non-Abrahamic traditions?

- Judaism: Questions concerning human purpose and meaning from a Jewish perspective, despite a wealth of primary sources from ancient times until the early-modern period, remain under-researched in the philosophy of religion. One distinctive feature of the Jewish tradition is that Jewish thought often identifies a community of people, rather than just an individual, as the bearer of purpose and meaning in life. According to Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, for instance, the Hebrew Bible and the Rabbinic tradition, think of the individual as receiving an identity, epistemic moorings, and a sense of purpose from being situated in a community. Also, Rabbi Immanuel Jacobovitz argues that, from a Jewish perspective, every community, and every individual within a community, should viewed themselves as chosen to fulfil a specific task. The notion that each person has a *tafkid* (a role to play) in this life, can also be found as a central feature of early Hassidic thought, according to which a major task in the life of each person is to try to figure out what their *tafkid* is. Some Jewish sources share with other religious traditions the claim that a major goal of human life is to achieve some sort of closeness to God (*dveikut*), thought of either as *unio mystica*, or in slightly less esoteric terms, as an intimate experience of God's presence. Other Jewish sources, much emphasised (and sometimes repackaged) in more progressive streams of Judaism, but still present in the primary sources and in some threads of contemporary Orthodoxy, is the view that some sort of fixing, or repair of the world (*tikkun*), is the major purpose of human life on earth, and/or the special mission of the Jewish people. Interpretations of this notion varies from the more mystical and even theurgic, according to which the performance of religious ritual brings a mystical healing to the fractures of the world, all the way to the more pragmatic, according to which religious rituals help to shape the human person into a better advocate for social justice. Some of these lines of thought might lend themselves to philosophical and empirically informed research. For example, to what degree does community membership, and sustained engagement in local communities with face-to-face encounters, as opposed to geographically dispersed online communities, foster epistemic virtues, and good citizenship? In what ways, and how effectively, might religious ritual promote active and engaged citizenship? When and how might the belief in chosenness and the notion of a Divine calling lead to greater human

flourishing, and when and how might it promote the proliferation of chauvinism and arrogance?

- Traditional African religions: Vitality is a concept that is salient in traditional African religions, and it is closely connected with human purpose and meaning. Understanding this concept in relation to spiritual reality is crucial for developing an African account of how to live well. First, should vitality in African traditions be understood naturalistically? If the answer is affirmative, it may be possible to underpin the African belief in vitality by appealing to relevant psychological or biological research. However, some philosophers claim that African vitalism must be understood in terms of liveliness and creative power, which are linked to both natural and supernatural realms. According to them, the good life requires us to maintain a high level of vital energy by treating spiritual entities like God respectfully, as well as other humans and the natural environment. To examine the cogency of such an account, we need to understand the relationship between God and vital energy in traditional African religions. Some African scholars argue that God is subservient to the ubiquitous phenomenon of vital force, while some others argue that God is the source of the vital force who transmits it to humans. These views can become even more complex when we consider other beliefs and practices in traditional African religions, such as ancestor worship. For instance, if God is the source of vitality, what role, if any, do ancestors play in relation to vitality? Can they affect the level of our vital energy? Could encounters with malevolent ancestors, for example, interfere with one's pursuit of human purpose and meaning? If the answer is affirmative, could they even make one's life purposeless or meaningless? These issues are also relevant to growing population of "religious nones" in Africa. Could those who are not attracted to supernaturalism maintain the African account of human purpose and meaning by construing vital force without referring to supernatural entities?