

## Public Theologies of Technology and Presence

### *Research Initiative*

#### **Request for Proposals**

The Institute of Buddhist Studies, with the support of the Henry Luce Foundation, invites proposals from scholars across the academic disciplines specializing in any religious traditions, and from theologians from all religious traditions, to participate in a three-year research initiative and series of meetings addressing the impacts of technologies on human relationships.

Thirteen scholars of religion and theologians will receive grants of \$10,000 each to support individual research projects on technologies and interpersonal presence. Grantees will gather yearly to share and hone their research and its applications, explore opportunities for collaboration, and take advantage of significant Silicon Valley and media resources.

The deadline for the submission of application materials is *May 7, 2018*.

#### **Overview**

Public Theologies of Technology and Presence seeks to identify and cultivate new models of public theology (broadly construed) that powerfully address a central concern of contemporary life: The ways in which technologies reshape human relationships and alter how people are or are not “present” to each other.

Over the past several decades, technologies have radically reworked interpersonal presence. This is true across the full gambit of human interaction; wherever and however a person might come into contact with another person, new technologies are continually emerging that shape and host, that facilitate and block, these forms of contact. Whether new smart phones, social media apps, virtual reality headsets, social gaming platforms, romance apps, social commerce platforms, onward and onward—these technologies are remaking what human relationships, and specifically what interpersonal presence, looks like in contemporary life. These shifts in presence have profound implications both for individuals and for the webs of relationships—local communities, broader publics—in which they participate.

Scholars of religion and theologians are in a prime position to speak to these developments both descriptively and prescriptively. Popular reflections on technology and presence tend to dip and weave through religious and spiritual territories, often drawing upon concepts and vocabularies deeply rooted in religious traditions, histories, and practices, but without making such rootedness clear or explicitly cultivating religious traditions as resources. Major opportunities exist to speak directly from within or with knowledge of the religious frameworks that are quietly fundamental to the culture and to this conversation. In this fashion and others, scholars of religion and theologians possess powerful toolsets through which to examine, critique, and advise technologists and consumers regarding technology and presence. Yet they rarely participate actively in these public discussions.

The framing as “public theology” allows for boundary-crossing work at the intersections of religion scholarship, theology, journalism and popular media, and technology itself. Public theology in this case is about drawing on ideas and resources from the academic study of religion and/or theology in order to speak compellingly about the impacts of technologies on presence. This allows the academic study of religion and theology to lay claim to addressing this issue of great public concern; and it carves out new roles for university departments of religion and theological institutions.

Grants awarded to thirteen scholars of religion and theologians, from a broad swath of academic disciplines and religious traditions, will support individual research projects that explore technology and presence as public theology. (Three journalist grantees will also participate fully in the program.) Over the course of three years, the grantees will gather yearly at the Institute of Buddhist Studies for meetings and presentations about their ongoing work, with conference meetings and virtual meetings in addition.

In the second and third years, the gatherings will include engagements with leading Silicon Valley technologists and technology companies doing work relevant to grantee research. This will incorporate meetings, demonstrations of new technologies, and visits to technology company campuses. It will also include grantee presentations addressing the concrete implications of their research on presence for technological work and innovation, and commentary from the technologists grounded in the practicalities of their work. These engagements will be structured to allow grantees access to cutting-edge technologies relevant to their research and to the technical processes and company cultures through which these take shape; to develop lasting relationships and collaborations between the grantees and the technologists; and to chart specific, active roles for religion scholars, theologians, and their institutions in Silicon Valley work. This will be aided by an Advisory Board including scholars, theologians, and key technologist and media professionals.

Applications are welcome from scholars in all academic disciplines with specializations in all religious traditions, and from theologians from all religious traditions, including traditions such as Buddhism that are underrepresented in theological study. As such, the grantee cohort will be diversely oriented as to what “theology” and “public theology” mean and entail, including moving beyond traditional definitions. Grantees will come at their research from a wide variety of foci and methodological approaches. They will be unified in their attentions to examining technologies’ impacts on interpersonal presence.

Each scholar or theologian grantee will be expected to produce a scholarly book; or 3-4 journal articles; or 1-2 journal articles and 3 pieces of popular media.

***Program Director***

*Dr. Steven Barrie-Anthony  
Institute of Buddhist Studies*

***Inquiries and Correspondence***

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**Eligibility and Requirements**

Applications are welcome from scholars from across the academic disciplines who study any religious traditions, and from theologians from all religious traditions, specifically including traditions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, and so forth that are underrepresented in theological study. Applicants must have completed the Ph.D. or terminal degree by the time of application.

Grantees will be expected to: Attend and actively participate in all program meetings, including four in-person meetings at the Institute of Buddhist Studies (costs covered) and an annual dinner meeting held in conjunction with the American Academy of Religion conference; produce a scholarly book, or 3-4 journal articles, or 1-2 journal articles and 3 pieces of popular media; and contribute occasionally to the program’s digital forum. Grantees will also be encouraged to develop and teach a course related to their research on technology and presence, at their home institutions, over the course of the program.

**Program Timeline**

<i>May 7, 2018</i>	Deadline for applications
<i>July 15, 2018</i>	Grantees announced
<i>September 5, 2018</i>	Start date for funded projects
<i>May 24, 2021</i>	End date for funded projects

**Application Instructions**

Applicants should submit the following materials by May 7, 2018:

1. Cover letter (1 page max)
2. Project description (5 pages max). Include: research objectives and methods; planned outputs; rationale for fit in this program, such as interest in engaging grantee colleagues across disciplines and traditions as well as technologists and broader publics.
3. Project summary (500 words max). Summarize the project in language accessible to an interested general audience. If the project is funded this will be used for publicity purposes.
4. Project timeline (1 page max)
5. Curriculum Vitae
6. Writing sample, ideally a published article or book chapter.

Length guidelines refer to 12-point font, single-spaced text.

Proposals should be combined into a single PDF document and sent by email attachment to: [stevenba@shin-ibs.edu](mailto:stevenba@shin-ibs.edu). Confirmation of receipt will be provided.

Please address any questions about the program or the application process to Program Director Dr. Steven Barrie-Anthony: [stevenba@shin-ibs.edu](mailto:stevenba@shin-ibs.edu), (510) 500-9722.

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**The Institute of Buddhist Studies** ([www.shin-ibs.edu](http://www.shin-ibs.edu)), established in 1949 and located in Berkeley, California, is one of the few Buddhist seminaries and graduate schools in North America. IBS offers graduate-level degree and certificate programs across the full breadth of the Buddhist tradition. Through its affiliation with the Graduate Theological Union and its relationship with UC Berkeley's Group in Buddhist Studies, IBS faculty and students undertake cross-disciplinary and intra-religious approaches to the study of religion. The Public Theologies of Technology and Presence program extends IBS's cornerstone interest in applying theological insight to innovative work in the contemporary world as well as its joint academic and theological foci and its dedication to collaboration across traditions.

**The Graduate Theological Union** ([www.gtu.edu](http://www.gtu.edu)) is the largest and most diverse partnership of seminaries and graduate schools in the United States, pursuing interreligious collaboration in teaching, research, ministry, and service. The GTU is a

pioneering educational environment: a consortium of eight independent theological seminaries and ten centers and affiliates. Since its founding in 1962, the GTU has produced thousands of alumni who teach at eminent universities and seminaries, minister to a broad range of congregations, and work in a variety of arenas—cultural, economic, religious, and political—to achieve the greatest good.

**The Henry Luce Foundation** ([www.hluce.org](http://www.hluce.org)), established in 1936 by Henry R. Luce, the co-founder and editor-in-chief of Time Inc., seeks to bring important ideas to the center of American life, strengthen international understanding, and foster innovation and leadership in academic, policy, religious and art communities. **The Luce Fund for Theological Education** supports the development of new models of teaching and learning, research and publication, leadership development and educational program design. The Fund places central emphasis on the challenges of public engagement, within and across multiple religious traditions, and in a variety of different contexts.