

US funding

Institute backs way-out physics

A new organization created by a foundation that aims to bring together science and religion has announced a series of grants to support research on issues too speculative and philosophical to appeal to the usual granting agencies. The Foundational Questions Institute (FOXi), formed by the billion-dollar Templeton Foundation, will provide over \$2m for 30 loosely physics-based projects. They cover topics that range from quantum space and hidden variables in string theory to the search for life on hot, rocky extrasolar planets.



Quids In Loeb.

A grant worth almost \$50 000 for Harvard University astronomer Abraham Loeb exemplifies the type of project that the institute will back. Loeb plans to piggyback on projects that look for low-frequency cosmic hydrogen in order to search for extra-terrestrial radio signals (which would share very similar frequencies). "The chances of detecting such signals are very small," says Loeb, "but the idea is attractive because the information in the frequency data would otherwise be tossed away without recognizing it."

Loeb admits that he had some initial reservations about applying for the grant because of the religious nature of the Templeton Foundation, but believes "it is doing an honest job". The vice president of the foundation, planetary scientist Charles Harper, maintains that FOXi is independent and free to pursue its own interests. Indeed, FOXi's scientific director, Max Tegmark of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), says he accepted the directorship because he felt that it was an opportunity to enable really exciting research. "I am not religious," he adds.

FOXi has attracted several top-notch scientists to its panel of scientific advisers, including Cambridge University astronomer and Royal Society president Martin Rees, and MIT physicist and pioneer of inflationary theory Alan Guth. Even some critics of FOXi concede that the institute has stayed clear of religious issues so far.

FOXi expects to award its next round of grants in 2008.

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