

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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June 9, 2016

Sent via email only to: _____@nasa.gov, _____@nasa.gov

Dr. Penelope Boston
Director, NASA Astrobiology Institute

Dr. Mary A. Voytek
NASA Senior Scientist for Astrobiology

Re: Rescind NASA grant to Center for Theological Inquiry

Dear Dr. Boston and Dr. Voytek:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation regarding a May 2015 grant made by the NASA Astrobiology Program to the Center for Theological Inquiry. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with over 23,500 members across the country; many are deeply interested in the vital work NASA accomplishes for humanity. We protect the constitutional separation between state and church and represent the 23% of Americans that are nonreligious.¹

We understand that in May 2015, the NASA Astrobiology Program awarded \$1.108 million to the CTI for “an interdisciplinary inquiry on the societal implications of astrobiology, the study of the origins, evolution, distribution, and future of life in the universe.”² According to CTI’s director William Storrar, “The aim of this inquiry is to foster *theology’s* dialogue with astrobiology on its societal implications, enriched by the contribution of scholars in the humanities and social sciences.”³

Though scholars from the humanities and social science are apparently involved, the principal thrust of the grant is theological, and therefore religious. And though ostensibly ecumenical, CTI is “rooted in Christian theology.”⁴ **In other words, NASA appears to be giving money to a religious organization to determine how the possible future discovery of extraterrestrial life might impact Christian theology and religious beliefs.**

We formally request that NASA rescind this grant as it appears to be both unconstitutional and unnecessary—an egregious misuse of secular tax dollars. FFRF has submitted a FOIA to help us determine additional factual and legal issues that may arise out of this grant.

We also understand that the John Templeton Foundation, known for awarding a lucrative annual prize to scientists who work “to comprehend the many and diverse manifestations of the Divine,” is co-sponsoring this project.⁵ If the Templeton Foundation wishes to fund religious research, it can use its \$3 billion to do so, the U.S. government may not.

Constitutional issues

Government funded scientific studies of theology raise state-church concerns. The CTI director has admitted this research has a religious purpose: “to foster theology’s dialogue with astrobiology.” We

¹ *America’s Changing Religious Landscape*, Pew Research Center (May 12, 2015), available at <http://pewrsr.ch/1FhDslC>.

² William Storrar, “CTI Receives NASA Grant,” CTI News Release (May 12, 2015), <http://bit.ly/1tcLjVt>.

³ *Id.* Emphasis added.

⁴ CTI website, “From the Director,” http://www.ctinquiry.org/about#from_direct (last accessed June 8, 2016).

⁵ “Templeton Prize” at Templeton.org, <https://www.templeton.org/signature-programs/templeton-prize> (last accessed June 8, 2016).

completely understand the need for funding a wide range of research, but just as there are certain ethical constraints on research, there are constitutional restraints on government funding of research with a confessed religious purpose.

The Establishment Clause of the First Amendment prohibits any “sponsorship, *financial support*, and active involvement of the sovereign in religious activity.” *Walz v. NY Tax Comm’n*, 397 U.S. 664, 668 (1970) (emphasis added); *see also Bowen v. Kendrick*, 487 U.S. 589, 621 (1988); *Roemer v. Bd. of Pub. Works*, 426 U.S. 736, 754-55 (1976); *Hunt v. McNair*, 413 U.S. 734, 743 (1973). Direct aid is considered to have a “principal or primary effect” of advancing religion if the aid goes to institutions that are “pervasively sectarian.” *See Lemon; Bowen; McNair*.

Specifically, the government may not fund religious projects. *See Committee for Public Education v. Nyquist*, 413 U.S. 756, 777 (1973) (struck down repair grants meant to renovate parochial schools because the buildings were used for sectarian purposes); *see also Tilton v. Richardson*, 403 U.S. 672 (1971) (unanimously holding that government construction subsidies are unconstitutional if the buildings are used for religious activities); *Hunt v. McNair*, 413 U.S. 734 (1973) (upheld government construction bond only because the bond-financed buildings *were barred from being used for religious activities*); *Wirtz v. City of S. Bend, In.*, 813 F. Supp. 2d 1051, 1053 (N.D. Ind. 2011) (transferring government property to a religious school violates the U.S. and Indiana Constitutions.)

Just as the government cannot dictate theological doctrines to religion, the government cannot fund religion’s pursuit of theological doctrines. In fact, our courts of law are even prevented from adjudicating matters that necessarily require it to decide among competing interpretations of church doctrine, or other matters of an essentially ecclesiastical nature, ***even if they also touch upon secular rights***. *See, Serbian Eastern Orthodox Diocese v. Milivojevich*, 426 U.S. 696, 713 (1976) As the Supreme Court put it, “religious controversies are not the proper subject of civil court inquiry.” *Id.*

If our government cannot decide matters of theology, it cannot fund a religious organization to make those decisions instead.

Waste issues

No “dialogue” we’ve ever had comes close to the \$1.1 million price tag CTI needs to complete theology’s dialogue here. Using 5% of the Astrobiology’s annual budget to determine how theology—which is by definition a faith-based belief system—might respond to speculative future scientific discoveries is wasteful for two reasons.

First, theology is a bit like debating over the average height of leprechauns or the color of unicorn hair. Religion deals in matters of faith, not fact, and faith-based arguments inevitably boil down to arguments that cannot be settled by appeal to empirical evidence.

As CTI is part of a Presbyterian seminary and “rooted in Christian theology,” it will no doubt focus on the impact of any astrobiology discovery on Christianity. After all, it would have implications on the prospect for and mechanism of salvation. Christianity has had to wrestle with these issues before. How can a loving god condemn people who have never heard of Jesus—children that die too young or remote tribes—to eternal damnation? But such questions have nothing to do with our secular government, science, or, for that matter, empirical evidence. It’s all theology, and as Thomas Paine famously penned in *The Age of Reason*:

The study of theology, as it stands in Christian churches, is the study of nothing; it is founded on nothing; it rests on no principles; it proceeds by no authorities; it has no data; it can demonstrate nothing; and it admits of no conclusion. Not anything can be studied as a science, without our being in possession of the principles upon which it is founded; and as this is the case with Christian theology, it is therefore the study of nothing.

Second, there is no need to spend money to predict how religion will respond to the discovery of extraterrestrial life, which is unlikely to happen during the course of the funding anyway. History shows that religion does one of two things when presented with scientific discovery: denial or incorporation of the fact as “evidence” or “proof” of their revelation. (Perhaps a few new religions might spring up as a result of any such discovery as well.)

There can be no doubt that scientific discovery impacts religion. The arguments for gods always hide in the gaps of scientific knowledge. As Neil Degrasse Tyson put it, “If that’s how you want to invoke your evidence for God, then God is an ever-receding pocket of scientific ignorance . . .”⁶ “God” is receding because science and theology are two fundamentally different ways of seeking truth. Science has time-tested ways of falsifying its own hypotheses, and can also falsify religious hypotheses (e.g., the Book of Genesis version of creation). But theology has no way to adjudicate or falsify its own hypotheses, nor any of the hypotheses of science. It is this asymmetry that makes the mixture of science and religion both inappropriate and unproductive.

“The essence of science is that it is always willing to abandon a given idea for a better one; the essence of theology is that it holds its truths to be eternal and immutable. To be sure, theology is always yielding a little to the progress of knowledge . . .”⁷ H.L. Mencken was writing about the Scopes trial, but his words are just as applicable here.

Put another way, theology is about preserving and perpetuating ignorance; science about eradicating it. Science should not concern itself with how its progress will impact faith-based beliefs.

Our organization and its members truly admire all the wonderful work NASA has done over the years, and are all eager to see what it will discover in the future. But this grant crosses the constitutional line and misuses precious tax dollars reserved for true scientific endeavor. I’d be happy to discuss this letter with you and look forward to your written response.

Sincerely,



Andrew L. Seidel
Constitutional Attorney

⁶ “The Moon, the Tides and Why Neil deGrasse Tyson is Colbert’s God,” *The Science Network*, January 20, 2011, <http://thesciencenetwork.org/programs/the-science-studio/neil-degrasse-tyson-2>, clip of the relevant part excerpted: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=viNKvrL08c>.

⁷ H.L. Mencken, *Minority Report: H.L. Mencken’s Notebooks*, No. 232, p. 166 (Knopf, 1956)