

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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**Sent via email only to:** [mary.voytek-1@nasa.gov](mailto:mary.voytek-1@nasa.gov), [penelope.j.boston@nasa.gov](mailto:penelope.j.boston@nasa.gov)

Dr. Mary A. Voytek  
NASA Senior Scientist for Astrobiology

Re: Rescind NASA grant to Center of Theological Inquiry

Dear Dr. Voytek:

Thank you for your July 21, 2016 response to our letter requesting that NASA review and rescind its May 2015 grant (NNX14AR81G) to the Center of Theological Inquiry (CTI). That response indicates that you had reviewed CTI's grant and concluded that it did not violate the First Amendment. FFRF continues to object to the \$1.1 million grant awarded to CTI for theological research. Despite the claims in your letter, the grant violates the Establishment Clause.

FFRF does not object to the NASA Astrobiology Program's goal of studying and funding "the potential societal impact of finding life beyond Earth." Nor much of what the grant funds:

inquiries into what constitutes life, reflections on the nature and implications of superintelligent alien life, human understanding of space time, and how society might react to the discovery of extraterrestrial life, in addition to studies of political theology as a subject, and the relationship of astrobiology to religious ethics.

We have no problem with NASA funding or conducting research into human or alien life, or space time, or biomedical research (51 U.S.C. § 40501-505) or research on environmentally friendly aircraft (51 U.S.C. § 40701-704) or maintaining a Science, Space and Technology Education Trust Fund (51 U.S.C. § 40901) or partnering with museums (51 U.S.C. § 40907) because there is no separation of state and science or state and technology. However, our Constitution requires a separation of state and church. That prohibits the government from funding theological studies.

First, please understand that it is difficult to evaluate the full scope of this grant because NASA has refused to release CTI's grant application—the document that would best illuminate the purpose of the grant. Without it, we have only CTI President William Storrar's clear public statements about that purpose: "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." We are appealing this FOIA denial and have requested additional documents to help us determine the possible scope of this constitutional entanglement.

In the meantime, NASA cannot sidestep CTI's purpose by claiming that:

CTI's purpose is not the key inquiry for determining whether the Establishment Clause has been violated. Rather, the government's purpose is the key inquiry. In providing grant funds to a broad class of institutions, NASA's purpose is simply to advance the dialog on the topic of astrobiology and society, which may or may not include religious perspectives.

NASA cannot simply divorce its claimed purpose from CTI's admitted purpose. Imagine a public school hires a new science teacher, a young earth creationist who promises to teach his creationist theology in the science class if hired. The school's legitimate purpose (teaching science) is irrelevant because it hired a teacher with an openly religious purpose. NASA chose to fund CTI's theological inquiry, and "[i]n the absence of an effective means of guaranteeing that the state aid derived from public funds will be used exclusively for secular, neutral, and nonideological purposes, it is clear from our cases that direct aid in whatever form is invalid." *Comm. for Pub. Educ. v. Nyquist*, 413 U.S. 756, 780 (1973). As to NASA's purpose, the Supreme Court "has taken the view that a secular purpose and a facial neutrality may not be enough, if in fact the [government] is lending direct support to a religious activity. The [government] may not, for example, pay for what is actually a religious education, even though it purports to be paying for a secular one, and even though it makes its aid available to secular and religious institutions alike." *Roemer v. Bd. of Pub. Works of Md.*, 426 U.S. 736, 747 (1976).

*Roemer* is instructive. Citizens challenged Maryland's grants to religious colleges. Those grants were upheld because the use of funds for sectarian purposes was strictly prohibited and "religion did not so permeate the defendant colleges that their religious and secular functions were inseparable." *Id.* at 750. Schools that gave "only seminarian or theological degrees" were disqualified from the grants. *Id.* at 740. Here the same cannot be said. The grant funds a self-professed theological inquiry to an institute that, as its name indicates, is solely geared towards theology.

We are not arguing that NASA could not, for instance, give a grant to a scholar on religious history or comparative religion. We are not even arguing that NASA cannot study the impact of astrobiology on society, of which religion is a part. The issue is with what the money is being used for: theology.

NASA is not merely "includ[ing] religious perspectives." Instead, NASA is directly funding religious debate. For example, the only published article mentioned in CTI's Progress Report—indeed the only completed, tangible product from this grant according to that report—is Lucas Mix's "Life-Value Narratives and the Impact of Astrobiology on Christian Ethics." *Zygon*, vol. 51, no. 2 (June 2016): 520-535. NASA could spend \$1.1 million more effectively than that.

NASA failed to produce this article in our FOIA documents so perhaps NASA scientists have not yet read it, not that it will be terribly valuable to those scientists. Dr. Mix is using "scripture" to engage in Christian apologetics.

Mix's article appears in the "Exoplanets and Astrotheology" category on the *Zygon* website, and in the journal alongside other articles such as "Astrobiology and Astrochristology"<sup>1</sup> and "Astrotheology: On Exoplanets, Christian concerns, and Human Hopes."<sup>2</sup> From the abstract, Mix, an Episcopal priest with a doctorate from Harvard, appears to be arguing that although astrobiology shows humans to be just another form of life and not special in some way, "this should not be viewed as opposed to Christianity."

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<sup>1</sup> From the abstract: "The first issue deals with the question: should Christians expect many incarnations, one for each inhabited exoplanet; or will the single incarnation in terrestrial history suffice? The second issue deals with the question: why is there an incarnation in the first place? Does the divine presence in the historical Jesus mark a divine attempt to fix a broken creation or does it mark a divine self-communication that would occur with or without creation's fall into sin and death?"

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.zygonjournal.org/issue2016\\_2.html](http://www.zygonjournal.org/issue2016_2.html)

Stripped of academic verbiage and rhetorical throat clearing, the article basically argues that Christianity, and specifically the bible, should be interpreted to show that humanity's place in the universe agrees with modern science. The author sought "to reground discussion of astrobiology and life-value narratives in scriptural exegesis and contemporary science." In other words, he's trying to include theology in the scientific study of astrobiology.

The author "only had time here to discuss a few prominent Biblical themes, but Christian theology offers a number of critical and helpful insights into the question of human uniqueness, privilege, and place." Five pages of the 14-page article make up a section entitled, "Scriptural Witness," which is what it sounds like: the author interpreting the bible. Entire paragraphs in the article read like Christian apologetics:

**The New Testament challenges us to look for God's action specifically in humans and typically in Jesus Christ.** Human exceptionalism comes to the forefront. **If humans enjoy unique value in God's eyes, what aspects of our humanity account for this? We can ask by what traits or faculties God acts through humanity to bring about the new creation?** By what traits or faculties do we resist? Our role as saviors or defilers rests on such distinctions. **Neither can they be separated from our anthropology (understanding of humanity) or soteriology (understanding of salvation).** Benedict XVI (2007), quoting Gregory of Nazianzus, has said, "What has not been assumed has not been healed." **The incarnation must be comprehensive, with Christ fully human, so that redemption may also be comprehensive** (see also Hebrews 2). Other theologians set the parts against one another. If our human uniqueness is in our intellect and our intellect opposes our appetite, then the appetite must be diabolical. Alternatively, **if God acts through our will in opposition to our reason, then the reason becomes a stumbling block.** [Page 532].

Again, we are not suggesting that such disputation is off limits—just that it cannot be furthered with federal funds dedicated to that religious purpose.

CTI might include scholars from other disciplines, but that does not detract from its primary objective, which is evident from its name, website, its podcasts, and the publications it has produced since receiving NASA's grant. In the "Our Mission" section of CTI's website, it reads, "We convene leading thinkers in an interdisciplinary research environment where theology makes an impact on global concerns, and we share those discoveries to change the way people think and act." CTI's purpose, then, involves interdisciplinary research, but only toward the end of theology and its impact. Not only that, but the desire to share such research to change the way people think sounds awfully similar to proselytization. Furthermore, the section goes on to read, "The Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton, New Jersey, is an ecumenical institute for interdisciplinary research in the field of religion. James I. McCord founded it in 1978 to cultivate a theological renaissance through dialogue."<sup>3</sup> CTI is a religious organization that engages in religious scholarship, one so "permeated" with religion that it is ineligible for NASA's grants.

Finally, refusing to fund theological research does not raise the constitutional concerns you noted:

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<sup>3</sup> Thank you for clarifying that CTI is not officially affiliated with the Princeton Theological Seminary as our original letter mistakenly noted.

Moreover, to exclude one entity from competing for funding simply because some of its members have religious viewpoints would place NASA in the unfortunate situation of choosing between theistic and non-theistic viewpoints; this is precisely what the Establishment Clause forbids the agency from doing.

This interpretation is incorrect. First, we have never stated, let alone suggested, that NASA withhold funding from an entity because some staff members are religious. We are informing NASA that it cannot constitutionally fund theology; complying with the Constitution does not violate the Constitution. The Supreme Court has explicitly held that refusing to fund scholarships for theology is not religious discrimination under the First Amendment. *Locke v. Davey*, 540 U.S. 712, 720–21 (2004).

We again request that NASA rescind CTI's grant. FFRF is committed to pursuing this issue. To that end, we have submitted another FOIA request to learn more about the grant's awarding and NASA's relationship with CTI. Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Andrew L. Seidel  
Constitutional Attorney

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