

National Aeronautics and Space Administration

**Headquarters**

Washington, DC 20546-001



Reply to Attn of:

SMD/Planetary Science Division

Mr. Andrew Seidel  
Freedom from Religion Foundation  
P.O. Box 750  
Madison, WI 53701

JUL 21 2016

Dear Mr. Seidel,

This letter is in further response to the Freedom from Religion Foundation's (FFRF's) letter of June 9, 2016, regarding the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's (NASA's) grant NNX14AR81G to the Center of Theological Inquiry (CTI)). As a result of this letter, NASA has conducted a review of this grant and the activities funded by it. While NASA takes very seriously the concerns you have raised, it has concluded that the grant is neither unconstitutional nor an improper use of government funds.

By way of background, since 1998, addressing the societal implications of astrobiology and, specifically, the potential societal impact of finding life beyond Earth has been a goal of NASA's Astrobiology Program. Consistent with and in connection with that goal, NASA has provided funding for several activities that study these potential impacts from a variety of perspectives. For example, NASA has an ongoing Astrobiology and Society initiative with the Library of Congress (LOC) that was established by Baruch Blumberg in 2011. This initiative has resulted in a Library of Congress Chair in Astrobiology, The Blumberg Dialogues, and the Astrobiology Collegiate Debates. The Blumberg Chair was created to support scholars interested in the intersection of astrobiology and humanities. The NASA/LOC sponsored Blumberg Dialogues were a series of interdisciplinary discussions on astrobiology:

- "Astrobiology and the Religious Imagination: Reexamining Notions of Creation, Humanity, Selfhood, and the Cosmos."
- "Rethinking Life on Earth and Beyond: Astrobiology and the Role of Paradigm Shifts in Science and Human Self-Understanding."
- "Stories about Life in the Cosmos: Historical, Cultural, and Artistic Perspectives on Astrobiology."

Discussions of this nature are consistent with NASA's statutory function, which is for the Administration to not only explore space and conduct aeronautics research, but also "provide for the widest practicable and appropriate dissemination of information concerning its activities and the results thereof" (51 U.S.C. § 20112(a)(3)). Moreover, Congress' policy in establishing the Administration includes the objective of establishing "long-range studies of the potential benefits to be gained from, the opportunities for, and the problems involved in the utilization of aeronautical and space activities for peaceful and scientific purposes" (51 U.S.C. 20102(a)(4)). NASA's work in this area, therefore, is consistent both with Congressional policy and the Administration's authority.

It is in this context that NASA considers your claims about the grant to CTI. CTI's grant provides support for symposia and a research fellows program. In its call for applications for the research fellowship, CTI explains that its research fellows "come from a variety of disciplines and backgrounds and share a commitment to open, interdisciplinary discussions of fundamental questions from perspectives in theology, religious studies, humanities, the arts, or natural and social sciences." Program materials that CTI provided to NASA are consistent with CTI's description of the grant's aim. CTI's call for applications does not require that participants explore religious issues, nor does it require that they adhere to a particular religious sect. Research under way pursuant to this particular program includes inquiries into what constitutes life, reflections on the nature and implications of super-intelligent 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. Symposia presentations have included background briefings on scientific topics by astrobiologists, astrophysicists, and scientists from other disciplines.

NASA has not found any evidence that in this program CTI's scholars have been or are engaging in proselytizing for any particular religious tradition or for religion in general. With that in mind, we turn to the points raised in FFRF's letter. First, FFRF's letter asserts that CTI's purpose is "religious" on the basis of a statement by CTI's director stating that the aim of the subject grant is to "foster theology's dialogue with astrobiology on its societal implications, enriched by the contribution of scholars in the humanities and social sciences." However, 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. 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.

Nor has NASA found that the effect of providing the funding to CTI is to foster the advancement of religion. NASA has not found any evidence that CTI is "pervasively sectarian," as regards the grant in question.<sup>1</sup> While some scholars are researching topics

---

<sup>1</sup> Even further afield is the Templeton Foundation's purpose in providing funding to CTI. NASA does not have a relationship with the Templeton Foundation.

concerning religious and ethical questions, others are focused on questions of sociology and philosophy. FFRF's letter asserts that CTI is "a part of a Presbyterian seminary," which it is not. Even if it were, a religious organization can provide services that are of secular benefit to the government, as has been repeatedly recognized in, for example, the government providing funds to colleges and hospitals with religious affiliations.

Finally, FFRF's letter suggests that NASA's funding of this particular grant is wasteful, as NASA has no interest in "predict[ing] how religion will respond to the discovery of extraterrestrial life." This argument misses the point of NASA's interest. Most can agree that the discovery of life outside of Earth will have some impact on society, whether it is (for some) the delight in the confirmation of a hypothesis or (for others) questioning such a discovery's implications for the meaning of life here on Earth. The Constitution does not require the government or its agencies to blind itself to the fact that some proportion of the world's population holds religious views of one type or another and that those views may impact their reaction to such discoveries. NASA does have an interest in examining how best to convey scientific discoveries to society and anticipating how those discoveries could be received. Thus, the use of Federal funds for this purpose is appropriate. NASA cannot have an open conversation about the effect of astrobiological findings on society while allowing only one viewpoint and excluding others. Accordingly, NASA has concluded that it does not have a Constitutional obligation to comply with FFRF's request to rescind the grant awarded to CTI.

We appreciate your interest in NASA's work in the field of astrobiology. While this grant has been funded and will conclude in 2017, NASA will continue to consider the societal implications of its scientific work and welcomes constructive dialog with the public from many perspectives.

Thank you for providing NASA with your views.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Mary A. Voytek". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Mary A. Voytek, Ph.D.  
Senior Scientist for Astrobiology  
Planetary Sciences Division  
Science Mission Directorate