



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on December 6, 2025

University of Colorado Pays \$10 Million to Students, Staff Denied Religious Exemptions From Jab Mandate

The University of Colorado (CU) Anschutz School of Medicine recently [agreed](#) to pay over \$10.3 million to employees and students it denied religious exemptions from its since-rescinded Covid-19 vaccine mandate.

The settlement followed a 2024 federal appeals court [decision](#) declaring the policy, which it considered “motivated by religious animus,” an unconstitutional infringement on the plaintiffs’ First Amendment rights.

Exemption Preemption

According to [LifeSiteNews](#):



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In April 2021, the University of Colorado ... announced its requirement that all staff and students receive COVID jabs, leaving specific policy details to individual campuses. On September 1, 2021, it enforced an updated policy stating that “religious exemption may be submitted based on a person’s religious belief whose teachings are opposed to all immunizations,” but required not only a written explanation why one’s “sincerely held religious belief [or] practice of observance prevents them” from taking the jabs, but also whether they “had an influenza or other vaccine in the past.”

On September 24, the policy was revised to stating that “religious accommodation may be granted based on an employee’s religious beliefs,” but “will not be granted if the accommodation would unduly burden the health and safety of other [i]ndividuals, patients, or the campus community.”

In practice, that meant all religious exemptions were denied, CU being so totally on board the Covid Fear Express that its health system even [refused](#) to perform a lifesaving kidney transplant on an unvaccinated woman. Medical exemptions, on the other hand, continued to be approved.

In September 2021, the Thomas More Society filed suit against CU in federal district court on behalf of a Catholic physician and a Buddhist medical student, both of whom had been denied religious exemptions. The next month, more than a dozen additional employees and students joined the lawsuit.

CU in Court

The district court sided with the school, but a three-judge panel of the 10th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals overturned that decision in May 2024. According to a Thomas More Society [press release](#):

In addition to finding religious animus, the Court found that the vaccine mandates of the University’s Anschutz Medical Campus granted “exemptions for some religions, but not



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others, because of differences in their religious doctrines” and granted “secular exemptions on more favorable terms than religious exemptions,” all of which was illegal. The court also reaffirmed the First Amendment principle that government may not test the sincerity of employees’ religious beliefs by judging the legitimacy of those doctrines. The Court also held that the University’s mandates violated “clearly established” constitutional rights.

How CU thought it could get away with such shenanigans is anybody’s guess. The court [wrote](#), for example, that

the Administration decided that “it is ‘morally acceptable’ for Roman Catholics to take vaccines against COVID-19,” and that any Roman Catholic objections to the COVID-19 vaccine are “personal beliefs,” not “religious beliefs.” As a result, the Administration would not grant exemptions to Roman Catholic applicants under the September 1 Policy. [Citations omitted.]

Meanwhile, “the Administration admitted it would approve applications from practitioners of select, favored religions, such as Christian Scientists.”

When it tired of being the religious police and effectively banned religious exemptions while keeping medical ones, CU unconstitutionally made “a value judgment in favor of secular motivations because it [had] a lower bar for denying religious exemptions,” found the court.

Settling Account

By the time the appeals court ruled, CU had dropped its unscientific vaccine mandate. “But,” noted LifeSiteNews, “the harm had been done to those denied exemptions while it was in effect, including unpaid leave, eventual firing, being forced into remote work, and pay cuts.”

The decision, therefore, was still important. It reaffirmed that a government institution could not trample on an individual’s right to freely exercise his religion, even under the banner of “science.” Furthermore, thanks to CU’s decision to settle the case via its \$10 million payout, at least some of the harm wreaked by its former policy will be redressed.

However, as Thomas More Society senior counsel Michael McHale put it in a December 1 [press release](#):

No amount of compensation or course-correction can make up for the life-altering damage Chancellor [Donald] Elliman and Anschutz inflicted on the plaintiffs and so many others throughout this case, who felt forced to succumb to a manifestly irrational mandate. At great, and sometimes career-ending, costs, our heroic clients fought for the First Amendment freedoms of all Americans who were put to the unconscionable choice of their livelihoods or their faith during what [Supreme Court Justice Neil] Gorsuch has rightly declared one of “the greatest intrusion[s] on civil liberties in the peacetime history of this country.” We are confident our clients’ long-overdue victory indeed confirms, despite the tyrannical efforts of many, that our shared constitutional right to religious liberty endures.

Under the settlement, CU also agreed to allow students to request religious accommodations on the same terms as employees, to treat religious and secular exemption requests similarly, and to stop acting



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as judge and jury over students' and employees' religious beliefs.

Plaintiff's Prayer

"Nobody should be coerced into choosing between their faith and their livelihoods, as I and so many others at CU Anschutz were forced to do at the whim of ideological bureaucrats," said plaintiff Madison Gould. "CU's total disregard for our careers and livelihoods gutted the years of study and self-sacrifice poured out by so many in pursuit of serving the weakest among us."

"May our nation," Gould added, "never witness anything like this travesty again."



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