

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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SENT BY US MAIL & EMAIL

Allen.Morrison@asu.edu

Allen J. Morrison
CEO & Director General
Thunderbird School of Global Management
1 Global Place
Glendale, AZ 85306-6000

Re: Bibles in Guest Rooms

Dear Dr. Morrison:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to alert you to a constitutional concern regarding the placement of religious literature in a hotel on public property. We were contacted by a concerned Thunderbird employee. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 23,500 members nationwide, including nearly 550 members in Arizona and a chapter in Phoenix. Our purpose is to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church.

It is our understanding that in 2015, the Thunderbird School of Global Management, including the Thunderbird Executive Inn, became a unit of ASU. We are informed that despite this, guest rooms at the Thunderbird Executive Inn are stocked with bibles.

It is a fundamental principle of Establishment Clause jurisprudence that a government entity cannot in any way promote, advance, or otherwise endorse religion. If a state-run university has a policy of providing a Christian religious text to guests, that policy facilitates illegal endorsement of Christianity over other religions and over nonreligion. Permitting members of outside religious groups the privilege of placing their religious literature in public university guest rooms also constitutes state endorsement and advancement of religion.

Providing bibles to Inn guests sends the message that ASU endorses the religious texts. It sends the message to non-Christian and non-religious guests that the university expects they should read the Bible, and specifically the version of the bible provided; the Gideon Bible. Certainly, if guests want to read this religious text during their stay, they can bring their own copy or access any of the numerous churches or libraries near the university. The State of Arizona should not promote one set of religious beliefs over others by assuming all of its guests are Christian.

State-run colleges have a constitutional obligation to remain neutral toward religion. When a government entity like ASU distributes such material to visitors, it has unconstitutionally entangled itself with a religious message, in this case a Christian message. State sponsorship of a

religious message “is impermissible because it sends the ancillary message to . . . nonadherents ‘that they are outsiders, not full members of the political community and accompanying message to adherents that they are insiders, favored members of the political community.’” *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290, 309-10 (2000) (quoting *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. at 668) (O’Connor, J., concurring). Such a practice alienates non-Christian guests whose religious beliefs are inconsistent with the message being promoted by the bibles, including the nearly 30% of American adults who are non-Christian.¹

As you may know, the mission of the Gideons is to “win the lost for Christ.” The Gideon Bible and the Gideons’ efforts to proselytize have frequently brought about conflict with non-religious persons and persons from minority faiths. Regardless of whether the bibles were donated by a private party, the placement of a holy book in guest rooms for guests to read demonstrates government endorsement of a religious message. It is legally insignificant whether state money was expended to purchase the bibles. *See, e.g., Stone v. Graham*, 449 U.S. 39, 42 (1980) (“It does not matter that the posted copies of the Ten Commandments are financed by voluntary private contributions, for the mere posting of the copies under the auspices of the legislature provides the ‘official support of the State . . . Government’ that the Establishment Clause prohibits.”).

Northern Illinois University, the University of Wisconsin, Pennsylvania State University, Portland State University and the University of Iowa all removed bibles from hotel rooms in recent years after FFRF contacted them. We request that Arizona State University follow suit by immediately removing bibles from each guest room in the Thunderbird Executive Inn. Individuals, not the state, must determine what religious texts are worth reading. Please provide us with a written response outlining the actions that are being taken to remedy this concern.

Sincerely,



Madeline Ziegler, Esq.
Cornelius Vanderbroek Legal Fellow
Freedom From Religion Foundation

¹ *America's Changing Religious Landscape*, Pew Research Center (May 12, 2015), available at www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/.