

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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June 6, 2018

SENT VIA U.S. MAIL:

The Honorable Mike Pompeo
Secretary
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

Re: Inclusion of nonreligious representative at religious liberty meeting

Dear Mr. Secretary:

We are writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) and our more than 33,000 nonreligious members across the country to request that you include a nonreligious representative at the recently announced religious freedom event scheduled for July 25th and 26th of this year. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to upholding the constitutional separation between state and church, and educating the public on matters relating to nontheism.

You recently announced the “first ever Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom at the Department of State.”¹ You indicated that this group will “break new ground” by “identifying concrete ways to push back against persecution and ensure greater respect for religious freedom for all.”²

FFRF requests written assurances that the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom planned on July 25th and 26th will include an appropriate nonreligious representative.

You did not disclose who you will invite to participate in this meeting, beyond your remarks that you will host your “counterparts from likeminded governments, as well as representatives of international organizations, religious communities, and civil society to reaffirm our commitment to religious freedom as a universal human right.” Based on this description and your decision to call the meeting a “Ministerial,” we are concerned that the meeting may be limited to or heavily favor ministers and other representatives of religious groups. If so, the exclusion of a nonreligious representative directly undercuts the goal of advancing religious freedom. Even your office’s own International Religious Freedom Report for 2017

¹ See www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2018/05/282789.htm.

² *Id.*

acknowledged that some of the most alarming threats to religious liberty around the globe are directed at people who adhere to no religion at all—atheists, agnostics and other freethinkers who are punished for the perceived slight of apostasy and the victimless crime of blasphemy.

Religious freedom necessarily includes the freedom to dissent. Discrimination against nonadherents of a country's majority religion is an assault on religious liberty, regardless of whether the person being discriminated against is a member of a minority religion or is entirely nonreligious. Overall, 24% of Americans identify as nonreligious.³ That 8 point increase since 2007⁴ and 15 point jump since 1990⁵ makes the “nones” the fastest growing identification in America. Nationally, 38% of younger Americans are nonreligious.⁶ This includes about 21% of younger Americans who are either atheist or agnostic.⁷

You have rightly condemned the persecution of Jewish and Christian residents of Muslim-majority countries.⁸ However, your office's international religious freedom report documents multiple examples of persecution of atheists and other religious dissenters in these same countries. In many countries, including the United States, children growing up in the majority religion are taught that atheists deserve ridicule and even death. Any attempt to enhance religious liberty must address this prejudice against nonbelievers.

The ministerial meeting should reflect the report's findings. For instance, the report points out that Saudi Arabia sentenced a young man named Ahmad Al-Shammari to death on charges of atheism and blasphemy after he “allegedly posted videos to social media accounts in which he renounced Islam and the Prophet Mohammed.”⁹ Last year, the Saudi Arabian Supreme Court upheld his conviction. We wrote to your office urging you to take immediate action to fight against this death sentence based on a peaceful citizen's religious beliefs. We never received a response.

³ Robert P. Jones & Daniel Cox, *America's Changing Religious Identity*, PUBLIC RELIGION RESEARCH INSTITUTE (Sept. 6, 2017), available at www.prrri.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PRRI-Religion-Report.pdf.

⁴ *Nones on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation*, THE PEW FORUM ON RELIGION & PUBLIC LIFE (October 9, 2012), available at <http://www.pewforum.org/Unaffiliated/nones-on-the-rise.aspx>.

⁵ Barry Kosmin, *National Religious Identification Survey 1989-1990*.

⁶ Jones, *America's Changing Religious Identity*.

⁷ *Atheism Doubles Among Generation Z*, THE BARN A GROUP (Jan. 24, 2018), available at www.barna.com/research/atheism-doubles-among-generation-z/.

⁸ See, e.g., Tovah Lazaroff, *U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo: Iran Destabilizes Entire Middle East*, THE JERUSALEM POST, April 29, 2018, available at <https://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/US-Secretary-of-State-Pompeo-Iran-destabilizes-entire-Middle-East-552999> (“This does indeed mean standing together against . . . the persecution of Jews and the slaughter of Christians.”).

⁹ Saudi Arabia 2017 International Religious Freedom Report at 1, 9, available at www.state.gov/documents/organization/281248.pdf.

Al-Shamri's sentence is not an isolated case. There has a deeply disturbing trend in increasingly prominent and barbaric blasphemy prosecutions. Another example is last year's imprisonment of an Indonesian governor, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, after he was found guilty of insulting the Koran.¹⁰

Besides state-sanctioned blasphemy laws, many nonreligious people around the world have been slaughtered due to their lack of religion. For instance, in 2015 Avijit Roy, a U.S. citizen of Bangladeshi origin, was hacked to death by machete-wielding radical Islamists. This is just one widely reported example, again confirmed by your office's own report.¹¹

Excluding a persecuted minority from a group aimed at ending the persecution of minorities would deeply undermine both the group's efficacy and its integrity as an advocate of true religious liberty.

If you do not already have nonreligious or atheist representative scheduled to attend, FFRF co-president Dan Barker would be honored to fill that role. Dan was a Christian preacher and missionary for 19 years and has been a prominent atheist activist and author since he left Christianity in 1984. This diverse experience giving him a unique perspective on the plight of both Christians and atheists around the world.

If the planned July event is truly dedicated to protecting religious freedom, the inclusion of an appropriate nonreligious representative is essential. Please respond at your earliest convenience to inform us of your decision on this matter.

Very truly,



Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor
Co-presidents

¹⁰ Indonesia 2017 International Religious Freedom Report at 8–9, *available at* www.state.gov/documents/organization/281068.pdf.

¹¹ Bangladesh 2017 International Religious Freedom Report at 6, *available at* www.state.gov/documents/organization/281262.pdf.