

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

P.O. BOX 750 • MADISON, WI 53701 • (608) 256-8900 • WWW.FFRF.ORG

July 22, 2011

Ms. Ann Stock
Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs
U.S. Department of State, SA-5
2200 C Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20522-0500

COPY

Re: Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation

Dear Ms. Stock:

I am writing on behalf of members of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to urge you to discontinue disbursing funds for the refurbishment of religious institutions abroad. FFRF is a nationwide nonprofit organization that works to protect the constitutional principle of separation between church and state. FFRF represents nearly 16,500 members across the country.

According to the U.S. Department of State website, each year since its inception, the U.S. Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation has granted money for the preservation of religious institutions, including minarets in Africa, a temple and mosque in China, and Christian churches in Russia and Romania. The misuse of taxpayer money to support religious institutions abroad undermines the principles upon which this country was founded and send an impermissible, unconstitutional message that the U.S. government favors religion over nonreligion.

America was founded in part by refugees seeking freedom from government dictation of religion. These refugees wanted freedom from a government directing them as to which church to support, what religious rituals to engage in, or what to believe or disbelieve. The U.S. founders who adopted our entirely secular constitution knew that there could be no religious liberty without the freedom to dissent. Whether to pray, whether to believe in a god who answers prayers, is an intensely precious and personal decision protected under our First Amendment as a paramount matter of conscience.

Our nation is founded on a godless constitution whose only references to religion in government are exclusionary, such as the requirement that there shall be no religious test for public office (U.S. Const. art. VI). The United States was first among nations to adopt a secular constitution, vesting sovereignty in "We the People," not a divinity. Our founders were aware that "[t]orrents of blood have been spilt in the old world" when religion and government were united.¹

¹ James Madison, *Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments* (1785).

The Founders believed passionately in a policy of denying the use of public funds for religious institutions in order to protect the rights and conscience of all taxpayers. As Thomas Jefferson wrote,

to compel a man to furnish contributions of money for the propagation of opinions which he disbelieves, is sinful and tyrannical; that even the forcing him to support this or that teacher of his own religious persuasion, is depriving him of the comfortable liberty of giving his contribution to the particular pastor whose morals he would make his pattern...Be it therefore enacted by the General Assembly, that no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever...²

James Madison was no less concerned regarding the willingness of some states to allot public funding for religious use, decrying,

that same authority which can force a citizen to contribute three pence only of his property for the support of any one establishment, may force him to conform to any other establishment in all cases whatsoever[.]³

As stated in Senate Report 106-104, one purpose of the Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation is to represent a "non-commercial, non-political, non-military" image of America. It is our opinion that this face should also reflect our nation's constitution. The decision to allocate public funds for the purpose of rebuilding churches, mosques, temples, and other religious landmarks impermissibly entangles the U.S. government in a highly political arena: the message and work of religious organizations. Additionally, it is likely that some of these religious groups seeking U.S. monetary aid espouse ideologies that are in opposition to U.S. policies and law (e.g. the persecution of other religious and/or irreligious groups, the subjugation of women, and the vilification of responsible family planning tools).

The stated purpose of the Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation is noble, and we agree that non-commercial, non-political, and non-military projects to protect, preserve, and restore the cultural heritage of other nation-states is a worthy endeavor. However, funding religious organizations – at home or abroad – is not apolitical, and it sends the message that the United States government willingly expends its tax dollars on the subsidization of religious institutions. In fact, of the approximately \$6 million awarded by the Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation in 2010 alone, it appears that more than \$2 million directly benefitted religious structures and organizations.⁴

² Thomas Jefferson, The Virginia Act for Establishing Religious Freedom (1786).

³ James Madison, *Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments*.

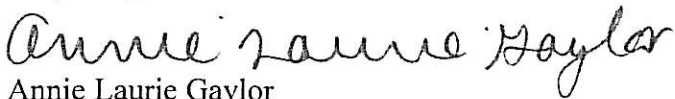
⁴ U.S. Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation 2010 Awards.

<http://exchanges.state.gov/media/pdfs/office-of-policy-and-evaluations/ambassadors-fund/afcp2010list.pdf>

The fact that these religious groups operate on foreign soil does no more to complicate the issue than if they were American churches seeking federal funding. Domestically, the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment prohibits government financing or government sponsorship of religion. It is unconstitutional for a government-funded program to have a principal "effect of advancing or inhibiting religion." *Lemon v. Kurtzman*, 403 U.S. 602, 612 (1971). By funding religious institutions abroad, the Department of State acts in a manner that would likely be prohibited if undertaken domestically.

In light of the foregoing concerns, we urge the Department of State to cease funding the refurbishment of religious institutions abroad through the Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation or any other federal coffer. In economically challenging times such as these, it makes little sense to spend precious tax dollars on projects that undermine the history and identity of this great nation.

Very truly,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Annie Laurie Gaylor". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name and title.

Annie Laurie Gaylor
Co-President