

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

July 5, 2022

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden
President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, D.C. 20500

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

Re: Thank you for your commitment to religious and non-religious freedom

Dear President Biden and Secretary Blinken:

We are writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to thank both of you for taking action to address the plight of many atheists, freethinkers, and other non-religious individuals around the world. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 38,000 members across the country, including members in all 50 states and in the District of Columbia. FFRF protects the constitutional separation between state and church and educates about nontheism.

As you may know, 15 Congress members on the Republican Study Committee wrote to you last week alleging that the State Department is using taxpayer dollars to “promote atheism worldwide.”¹ The members claimed that the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL) is using funds to promote atheism and “radical, progressive orthodoxy across the world.”² However, as you are well aware, the funding announcement stated the noble goal of DRL, which is to ensure religious freedom for everyone, “including the freedom to dissent from religious belief and to not practice or adhere to a religion.”³

¹ *Read: Rep. Jim Banks letter to President Biden, Secretary Blinken regarding Atheism Grants* Scribd (June 30, 2022), available at www.scribd.com/document/580515059/Rep-Jim-Banks-letter-to-President-Biden-Secretary-Blinken-regarding-atheism-grants?secret_password=FOFqsJ2ZTXbvJPjRiZiQ.

² *Id.*

³ *Read: DRL FY20 IRF Promoting and Defending Religious Freedom Inclusive of Atheist, Humanist, Non-Practicing, and Non-Affiliated Individuals*, U.S. Department of State (Apr. 21, 2021), available at www.state.gov/statements-of-interest-requests-for-proposals-and-notice-of-funding-opportunity/drl-fy20-irf-promoting-and-defending-religious-freedom-inclusive-of-atheist-humanist-non-practicing-and-non-affiliated-individuals/.

Therefore we urge you to dismiss the bad faith concerns of these members, who included radical political attacks against the State Department for “creating a ‘Special Representative for Racial Equity and Justice,’ whose mission will be to spread Critical Race Theory and other progressive dogmas worldwide, and working to remove restrictions on abortion around the globe.” DRL should continue to use funds as the Bureau deems necessary to protect religious freedom throughout the world, including for those who dissent from and do not practice or adhere to a religion, who are often most at risk. Furthermore, this is an opportunity to educate the public about the issues facing those not in the majority religion in many parts of the world, such as the prevalence of barbaric and victimless laws prohibiting blasphemy and apostasy. It is unfortunate that some politicians choose to pander to their base by falsely equating non-theism with radical ideologies.

FFRF recently commended Secretary Blinken and the State Department for standing up for religious and non-religious freedom through its annual report on international religious freedom.⁴ We are heartened by the State Department’s efforts to promote true religious liberty around the world, which necessarily includes the fundamental right to be free from government-imposed religion. Secretary Blinken and Ambassador Rashad Hussain put it well in the 2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: “We know that when the fundamental right of each person to practice their faith or to choose not to observe a faith is respected, people can make their fullest contributions to their community’s successes; entire societies are better off.”⁵ We are better off as a country when we respect one’s personal religious or non-religious preference.

The 2021 Report on International Religious Freedom also directly undermines the central point of the Republican Study Committee letter. The report documents religious freedom concerns in a neutral manner—Christians suffering discrimination in Muslim-majority countries, Muslims suffering discrimination in Christian-majority countries, nonbelievers suffering from blasphemy laws, and much more. As the title of NOFO at issue indicates quite plainly, the goal is to promote and defend religious freedom, “*inclusive of* atheist, humanist, non-practicing and non-affiliated individuals.”

The Department was correct to point out the discrimination freethinkers and atheists face in the world. According to a study published in *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, people discriminate against atheists when it comes to beliefs in the workplace.⁶ The study’s authors note that workers falsely perceive atheists as immoral

⁴ffrf.org/news/news-releases/item/41130-ffrf-welcomes-atheist-recognition-in-state-dept-s-religious-freedom-report.

⁵ Secretary Antony J. Blinken And Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom Rashad Hussain on the 2021 Report on International Religious Freedom U.S. Department of State (June 2, 2022), available at www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-and-ambassador-at-large-for-international-religious-freedom-rashad-hussain-on-the-2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/.

⁶ *People are less tolerant of atheists expressing their beliefs at work compared to Christians, Muslims, or Jews* PsyPost (Aug. 2, 2021), available at

and untrustworthy.⁷ Employers often see atheists and freethinkers as a “threat” to their workplace, because they associate atheists and freethinkers with more vocal expression of their beliefs.⁸

It is important to acknowledge that this country was founded on the basis of both freedom of and from religion. Non-religious Americans are the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population by religious identification — 3-in-10 adults today (29 percent of the population) identify as atheists, agnostics or “nothing in particular.” Overall, 35 percent of Americans are non-Christian.⁹ A recent survey found that 21 percent of Americans born after 1999 are atheist or agnostic.¹⁰ Luckily, we live in a country where those who don’t adhere to the local majority religion don’t typically face a risk of death or serious physical harm for their nonbeliefs, but that is not true everywhere.

FFRF has been working to bring attention to the plight of the nonreligious in other countries. For example, we condemned the recent announcement of a prolonged prison term for Mubarak Bala, a Nigerian freethinker, for the alleged crime of “blasphemy.” Three days after criticizing the Prophet Muhammad on Facebook on April 25, 2020, Bala was detained. Bala’s first child was born just six weeks before his arrest, and now Bala has been sentenced to 24 years in prison. Bala was charged with “10 counts of causing a public disturbance in connection to Facebook posts he is alleged to have made throughout April 2020, which are deemed to have caused a public disturbance due to their ‘blasphemous’ content.” In December, we wrote to Rashad Hussain, the U.S. ambassador-at-large for International Religious Freedom, to call for Bala’s release. This is just one example of the myriad issues DRL funding would be well used to help address.

Despite the rapid growth of atheism around the globe, there are only a few organizations, with sparse resources, that work to destigmatize the stereotypes non-religious people face and to fight against resulting anti-atheist policies. With funding like the DRL program at issue, non-religious organizations can create safe spaces, educational and networking opportunities, and provide organizational and training resources to our growing community. We are heartened that this service has been made available to help people who lack support from well-established and well-funded religious sects. The United States government, which is tasked with

www.psympost.org/2021/08/people-are-less-tolerant-of-atheists-expressing-their-beliefs-at-work-compared-to-christians-muslims-or-jews-61626.

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ Pew Research Center, “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace,” (Oct. 17, 2019) at pewrsr.ch/2VPiFS7.

¹⁰ *Atheism Doubles Among Generation Z*, The Barna Group (Jan. 24, 2018), www.barna.com/research/atheism-doubles-among-generation-z/.

neutrality under the Establishment Clause, must in fact be as concerned about discrimination against nonbelievers as believers.

Thank you for courageously standing up for American values in the face of faux patriotism, and false cries that the State Department is promoting “radical, divisive, and destructive cultural policies.” We appreciate your steadfast commitment to true religious freedom and to upholding the U.S. Constitution.

Very truly,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of two names: "Annie Laurie Gaylor" and "Dan Barker". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Annie Laurie Gaylor & Dan Barker

Co-presidents

ALG/DB:ks