

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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SENT BY US MAIL & EMAIL TO: rsreynol@iastate.edu

Mr. Richard S. Reynolds
Director, Memorial Union
Iowa State University
2350 Beardshear Hall
Ames, IA 50011

Re: Bibles in Memorial Union Guest Rooms

Dear Director Reynolds:

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 Iowa State University's ("ISU's") Memorial Union guest rooms. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with nearly 20,000 members nationwide, including members in Iowa. Our purpose is to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church and to educate about nontheism.

It is our understanding that guest rooms in the Memorial Union contain bibles. We were contacted by a concerned complainant who informs us that the bibles are in every guest room and that they were likely placed there by ISU itself. Presumably the bibles were provided by the evangelical group Gideons International. We are informed that there are no other religious or nonreligious books in guest rooms.

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 Memorial Union guests sends the message that ISU endorses the religious texts. Including bibles sends the message to non-Christian and non-religious guests that 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 Iowa should not promote certain religious beliefs by placing bibles in guest rooms.

State-run colleges have a constitutional obligation to remain neutral toward religion. When a government entity like ISU 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 members of the audience who are 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 (2001) (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 19% of American adults who are non-religious and the 27% of American adults who are non-Christian.

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. The Eighth Circuit, the controlling Court of Appeals for Iowa, has specifically noted that allowing Gideons to distribute bibles in public elementary and secondary schools promotes a Christian message. *See Roark v. South Iron R-1 Sch. Dist.*, 573 F.3d 556, 560-61 (8th Cir. 2009) (upholding permanent injunction against distribution of Gideon Bibles in a public school).

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.”).

Recently, the University of Wisconsin-Extension removed all bibles from its Lowell Center guest rooms in an effort to remain neutral toward religion. We request that Iowa State University follow suit by immediately removing bibles from each guest room in the Memorial Union and within all other ISU guest facilities. 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 constitutional violation.

Sincerely,



Patrick C. Elliott
Staff Attorney

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