



AMERICA'S ATHEIST DIPLOMACY by Michael T. McCaul December 2024

For the last two years, a little-watched congressional investigation has been exploring the nature of religious freedom and, specifically, whether the United States is an effective steward of that cause when it funds ideologically charged foreign aid projects overseas. **After obtaining information the Department of State tried to keep hidden, my colleagues and I have learned that some members of our nation's diplomatic corps consider the concept of "religious freedom" to be as malleable as clay, even entailing, in some cases, government promotion of nonbelief. Regardless of one's faith tradition or political allegiances, this distortion is cause for concern.**

For these bureaucrats, the term "religious" effectively denotes "having some disposition toward religion"—including the rejection thereof. The term "religious," therefore, can also mean "nonreligious." On this reading, funding for religious freedom initiatives may be diverted from religious minorities around the globe to support agnostics' and atheists' right to *disbelieve* in any deity and to manifest their nonbelief publicly. In the State Department's novel view, when difficult choices must be made regarding limited public funds, these nonreligious groups deserve the imprimatur of the United States government, sometimes to the exclusion of the truly imperiled faithful. And supporting these nonbelievers' "freedom" requires not only reducing state coercion of and societal discrimination against nonbelievers, but also actively promoting their worldviews, at least in certain countries.

This matter came to our attention in 2021 with a "notice of funding opportunity" for \$500,000. Issued by the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, the notice solicited proposals for programs that would "promote and defend religious freedom inclusive of atheist, humanist, non-practicing and non-affiliated individuals." In particular, the Department indicated to NGOs that the proposed programs should "increase capacity" of atheists and humanists to "form" and "strengthen" their "networks" in South Asia. If you cut through the diplospeak, that translates to: *We want you all to come up with ideas for expanding the presence and influence of atheists overseas.* The State Department, through the deployment of U.S. taxpayer dollars, sought to evangelize on behalf of the nonreligious—which is illegal under the Establishment Clause of the United States Constitution.

It would be one thing if, in the relevant countries, there were evidence that nonreligious people were being persecuted, and if U.S. diplomats' goal were more modest: simply to reduce the likelihood these people face violence. That aim is one I—and many of my colleagues—would endorse. But it is not the State Department's aim. In fact, the State Department's own International Religious Freedom reports during the relevant time period (and since), as well as the reports written by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), indicated that in countries like Nepal and Sri Lanka, certain *Christians and Muslims* have recently faced persecution. In the sections of the reports dealing with those two countries, there was no mention of atheists or humanists, much less of pogroms targeting them. The safety of nonreligious groups, at least relative to Christians and Muslims, was furthermore confirmed to congressional investigators firsthand while they were on the ground in Kathmandu. Indeed, the head of the most important humanist group in Nepal has said in a publicly available video online, "The humanist movement has very deep roots in Nepal; that's why being humanist is not that difficult."

The State Department was picking favorites. Washington, D.C.–based officials deliberately chose to spurn the religious groups most in need of assistance in the relevant countries and devote funds instead to a pet project, one that appears to have been tailored for the grantee. (We did, by the way, ask whether other religious freedom grants had gone to support Christians and Muslims in Nepal and Sri Lanka. Perhaps, we wondered, the atheism grant was counterbalanced by other funds to various religious minorities? The answer, however, was no.)

When State Department bureaucrats moved forward with the grantee’s proposal, they did so despite strong opposition from U.S. diplomats overseas, as well as from other regional experts at the Department. In an email obtained by the Foreign Affairs Committee, employees of the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs stated: “SCA Posts . . . strongly object to the . . . proposal”; the atheism “proposal seems[s] tailored to the [implementing] organization’s objectives rather than Nepal’s needs”; and “we have been very clear: our posts do Not [sic] want the . . . proposal to move forward.”

This grant, which funded various “training sessions” in South Asia, was breaking new ground. In internal emails, staff involved in the design of the grant were seen to remark, ==“Look at the pretty, innovative thing we did!” (a direct quote, believe it or not)==. Eventually it became clear why various higher-ups were described in other emails as “very engaged” and “eager” to push the atheist proposal forward.

Official grant documents, some of which were obtained only after I threatened (and later issued) a subpoena, were illustrative. In one, the implementing partner proposed disseminating humanist instructional materials: “translating and disseminating various humanist content (declarations, textbooks, guides, etc.) into the relevant national and local languages.” (Imagine the outcry if the United States government paid for Bibles to be circulated!) Other documents made clear that participants in the grant would mostly (and likely all) be atheists and humanists: “Applicants will be required to provide information on their humanist activism [and] their past and current affiliation with non-religious groups.”

In the training program implemented in Nepal, participants were shown various presentations. PowerPoint slides contained language and images suggesting clear animus toward religion. Some, for example, suggested that a so-called “freedom of religious belief” does *not* encompass Christian priests’ distribution of the Eucharist. *This stance contradicts both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which make clear that freedom of thought, conscience, and religion includes the right of an individual “to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance.”*

Other slides encouraged participants to adopt policy stances that are in clear tension with U.S. law. For example, a group discussion exercise asserted that when a Christian adoption agency, acting on sincerely held religious convictions, denies services to same-sex couples, it violates human rights. (In the recent case *Fulton v. City of Philadelphia*, America’s highest court decided 9–0 that the city could *not* bar faith-based adoption agencies from operating on the grounds that they deny service to same-sex couples.)

Perhaps most alarmingly, a major focus of the training programs was on recruitment for nonreligious (that is, antireligious) organizations. For example, in a series of slides, training participants were taught how to “grow their organizations” and “get their message out.” They were shown an “adoption ladder” explaining how to turn individuals into “humanists” who would then “give a lot of time and money” to the participant organizations, and were informed that the goal was to ensure that individuals become “active supporters of your humanist organization.”

The use of U.S. taxpayer money for programs that reject U.S. law and proselytize on behalf of atheists is bad enough. But the story gets worse: The NGO chosen to implement the grant was Humanists International, a group whose CEO has stated that the Catholic Church is “an institution which I think that you should be ashamed to be involved in” and has said that his job is “to combat the Vatican policies and to push against them.” Thus, the State Department has seen fit to provide “religious freedom” funding to an organization that seeks to “combat” certain religious faiths.

On top of that, a key implementer in Nepal blatantly lied to investigators during their multipurpose visit to the country, claiming he was unaware of the training sessions funded by the atheism grant and had not participated in them. Apparently, the ethical code of some humanists does not include honesty as a core tenet. The guile raises obvious questions about the people and entities benefitting from American largesse.

For its part, the State Department routinely changed the story it told Congress—suggesting administrative dysfunction at best, a bungled coverup at worst. Initially, the Department told the Foreign Affairs Committee that the atheism grant did not raise any Establishment Clause concerns. ***It later changed its tune,*** saying that, yes, the original proposal *did* contain some concerning ideas, but those had been noted and eliminated from the final version of the program implemented in Asia.

Finally, the Department conceded that, very late in the game, it had “become aware” of problematic slides that were presented to program participants in Asia—but insisted that the Department itself was not at fault. Rather, Humanists International had not been truthful with program officers. (***This alleged lack of prior knowledge is implausible.*** One Humanists International employee told us that, after Congress started investigating, the Department asked her to “neutralize”—in other words, doctor—the language in the relevant slides and paperwork submitted to the Department, without changing anything substantive in the program itself.)

The Department, feigning concern, promised to look into the matter, even going so far as to promise an investigation by its inspector general. ***Unsurprisingly, to date, nothing has come of that—just as there has been no contrition or commitment not to fund similar atheist programs down the road.***

Fair-minded believers from various faith traditions, and from across the political spectrum, must look out for wolves in sheep’s clothing. Causes that sound benign, such as religious freedom, can provide license for bureaucrats to exercise their “creativity.”

It is no excuse to say, as senior officials do, that their hands were tied. ***Nothing in the underlying federal statute—the International Religious Freedom Act—mandates atheist programming.*** The program officers simply felt that the act could be twisted to accommodate novel and dubious measures, so they moved forward, persecuted believers (who could have benefitted from the money) be damned.

The point is not to pick on humanists. They should be allowed to live and advocate as their consciences dictate. Nor is it to denigrate altogether the work done by the State Department’s Office of International Religious Freedom, some of which is quite good. The point is that Congress has a duty to share the information to which it has privileged access. ***In this case, we observe an elite, professional class that has no qualms about using taxpayer money to export its own secular agenda overseas, attempting to keep the details from being known outside the Department.***

So it goes in today’s culture of subversion. Historical figures are to be reviled, not revered. Religious freedom can be antireligious; down is up, and up is down. And the rest of the country, and world—the people scratching their heads at all this—well, see, they just don’t understand.

In the world of diplomacy, looking the other way is dangerous. Small problems can grow into big ones. Tolerating one misguided half-a-million-dollar program allows extensions and expansions of the model down the road. Congress must act to stop it, and now that my investigation has come so far, it will.

In the *Wall Street Journal*, Walter Russell Meade wrote recently that the United States is no longer the sole superpower, which means Americans must “think much harder about what we do and how we do it. There are good things we want that we just can’t afford to pursue. From an American point of view, geopolitical security is a must-have; freedom of religion in Turkmenistan is a luxury.” ***To call the promotion of atheism in Nepal a luxury, however, is too generous. It is sheer folly.***

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