



March 30, 2010

The Honorable Barack Obama
President of the United States of America
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

We the undersigned are writing to you concerning the still-vacant position of U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom. Religious freedom is foundational to American democracy, our Constitution, and the long, nonpartisan history of American promotion of human rights. Likewise, international human rights laws—especially the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights—stipulate robust commitments to “freedom of thought, conscience, and religion.” The absence of senior level leadership in your administration on this critical issue is of grave and urgent concern. As copiously documented in a recent report from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 70 percent of the world’s 6.8 billion people live in countries with a high or very high degree of restrictions on religion.

We write to you today to respectfully request that a person with advanced foreign policy experience and expertise on the right to religious freedom be appointed to serve as Ambassador-at-Large, and that this appointment be made in conjunction with the development and public announcement of an integrated strategy for promoting the freedom of religion. We recommend that this strategy be linked explicitly with your administration’s smart-power philosophy and respect-based engagement. It should bring the practical promotion of responsible religious freedom into the foreign policy mainstream, and should articulate concrete connections and synergies that are expected between religious freedom policy and other key foreign policy areas, including national security (especially counter-insurgency and stability operations), development, conflict resolution/reconciliation, public diplomacy, democracy promotion and consolidation, and U.S. engagement of multilateral institutions and international law.

We recommend further that the Ambassador-at-Large position be empowered to deliver results. The starting point of this empowerment is to elevate the ambassadorship to the standing originally intended for it by the International Religious Freedom Act (which establishes the ambassador as “principal advisor to the President and Secretary of State”). The Ambassador should work directly under the Secretary of State (just as most other ambassadors-at-large do, namely those for counter-terrorism, war crimes, and global women's issues), and should be included in senior level decision-making in the State Department and in interagency bodies.

We ask that this ambassadorship be filled by someone whose knowledge, experience, and stature are commensurate with strategic expectations and institutional demands. In order to succeed in the State Department and more broadly as a liaison and catalyst across all the relevant governmental and nongovernment organizations, the person occupying this post must possess serious and recognized expertise on religion, as well as on foreign and security policy (a point emphasized strongly in the recent report of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, *Engaging Religious Communities Abroad*).

In short, we believe your Administration should fill this important position not only quickly but strategically. As you highlighted in your June 2009 address in Cairo, religious freedom is not a peculiarly American value but a universal norm. At the same time, you wisely framed religious freedom as a practical necessity, as something that is quite simply “central to the ability of peoples to live together.” Likewise, as Secretary Clinton stated in October 2009, “religious freedom provides a cornerstone for every healthy society.” We encourage you to consult widely and to implement a creative and proactive strategy on religious freedom promotion. The Ambassador-at-Large appointment should be filled with this broader strategy in mind.

Sincerely,

Barry Bussey, Executive Director, North American Religious Liberty Association

Ann Buwalda, Executive Director, Jubilee Campaign USA

Abba Cohen, Washington Director and Counsel, Agudath Israel of America

Larry Cox, Executive Director, Amnesty International USA

W. Cole Durham, Jr., Director, International Center for Law and Religion Studies, Brigham Young University

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John L. Esposito, Founding Director, Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, Walsh School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University

Thomas F. Farr, Visiting Associate Professor, Walsh School of Foreign Service, and Senior Fellow, Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, Georgetown University; former Director, Office of International Religious Freedom, State Department

William A. Galston, Ezra K. Zilkha Chair in Governance Studies, Brookings Institution

Joseph K. Grieboski, Founder and Chairman of the Board, The Institute on Religion and Public Policy

Allen D. Hertzke, Presidential Professor of Political Science, University of Oklahoma; author of *Freeing God's Children: The Unlikely Alliance for Global Human Rights*

Dennis R. Hoover, Editor, *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*

Joel Hunter, Senior Pastor, Northland Church; member, President's Advisory Council on Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships

Douglas M. Johnston, Founder and President, International Center for Religion and Diplomacy

Salam Al-Marayati, Executive Director, Muslim Public Affairs Council

Steven T. McFarland, former Executive Director, U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom

Mary Beth Markey, Vice President for Advocacy, International Campaign for Tibet

Radwan Masmoudi, Founder and President, Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy

Thomas O. Melia, Deputy Executive Director, Freedom House

Carl Moeller, President and CEO, Open Doors USA

Chris Seiple, President, Institute for Global Engagement

Robert Seiple, former U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom

Manjit Singh, Chairman, Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund

James D. Standish, Director of UN Relations, Seventh-day Adventist Church; former Executive Director, U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom; member, White House Task Force on Interfaith Dialogue & Cooperation

Marc D. Stern, Acting Co-Executive Director, American Jewish Congress

Sayyid M. Syeed, National Director, Office of Interfaith and Community Alliances, Islamic Society of North America

Mark Tooley, President, The Institute on Religion and Democracy

Jim Wallis, President and Chief Executive Officer, Sojourners

James E. Winkler, General Secretary, United Methodist Church, General Board of Church and Society

Angela Wu, International Law Director, Becket Fund for Religious Liberty

Note: institutional affiliations are listed for identification purposes only.

cc: Honorable Hillary Clinton, Secretary of State