

March 9, 2023

Honorable Delegate Ben Barnes
Chair, House Appropriations Committee
House Office Building, Room
Annapolis, MD 21401

Re: Testimony in SUPPORT of HB912 Academic Accommodations Policy

Dear Chair Barnes and House Appropriations Committee Members:

Thank you for this opportunity to testify in strong support of House Bill 912 sponsored by Delegate Gabriel Acevero. My name is Homayra Ziad. I care deeply about this issue as a practicing Muslim, as a scholar and professor of religion and the study of Islam at Johns Hopkins University, as a mentor to many college students who are committed to religious practice, as the board president of the ACLU of Maryland, and as a mother of two Muslim children in Baltimore public schools who may find themselves at a public institution in Maryland in the not so far future.

HB912 would require each public institution of higher learning in the state to develop and adopt a written policy that provides reasonable academic accommodations for students of diverse faiths to practice their sincerely held religious beliefs including a) up to three excused absences per academic semester without penalty for observing religious holidays, b) reasonable alternative accommodations for exams, projects and other assignments missed on those dates, and c) a grievance process to report non-compliance.

I have taught college students for fifteen years, and I know that the college years are uniquely turbulent, a period when student's identities and communities are being deconstructed and reconstructed, defined and re-defined. Faith and spiritual practice are key sources of comfort and guidance for students seeking a foothold in the uncertainty of their environment. While many campuses are moving the needle forward on issues of racial, ethnic and gender diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), religion is a deeply misunderstood category in the world of DEI. As noted by America Indivisible's guide to DEI and religion, "(m)any DEI professionals lack the knowledge and expertise necessary to incorporate religion into their training and to develop workplace policies on religious diversity and inclusion."ⁱ In the absence of adequate training on religions and religious identity on university campuses, I have found that religiously committed students (especially from minority religious communities) find it very hard to advocate for themselves with their professors when it comes to accommodation for religious practices and sacred days, sometimes facing not just resistance and misunderstanding, but outright discriminatory behavior. This bill supports students in accessing their constitutional right to adequately practice their sincerely held religious beliefs without fear of shaming, retaliation, or academic disadvantage, and offers them avenues for grievance if their rights are not respected.

The Harvard University Pluralism Project draws an important distinction between religious diversity, which is the simple numerical existence of people of different religious commitments in one community, and religious pluralism, which is how communities actively engage with and respond to religious diversity to seek understand across lines of difference and together promote the civic good.ⁱⁱ In requiring clear policies for religious accommodation, HB912 supports religious

pluralism on campus and cultivates campus communities that foster genuine knowledge of, respect for, and engagement between the diverse religious commitments that make up our nation.

I unequivocally support this bill and respectfully urge you to vote in favor of it. You would be making a difference in the lives of thousands of students across the state. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

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ⁱ *DEI and Religion: A Quick Reference Guide for Public Servants*, America Indivisible, February 2023, p. 1

ⁱⁱ <https://pluralism.org/about>