

The Washington Area Secular Humanists, Inc.

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March 6, 2023

The Honorable Del. Joseline A. Peña-Melnyk
Chairperson, House Health and Government Operations Committee
House Office Building, Room 241
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Re: FAVORABLE for HB 871, Testimony from American Atheists in support of bill to amend the Maryland Constitution to remove improper religious tests

Dear Chairperson Peña-Melnyk, Vice-Chair Cullison, and Members of the Health and Government Operations Committee,

I am a proud and longtime resident of Maryland and represent the Washington Area Secular Humanists, Inc., commonly known as "WASH." WASH is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization incorporated in Maryland. We are a secularist organization and philosophical society that focuses on education, providing a social community, and advocating for science and the separation of church and state. We have hundreds of members in the Maryland, DC, and Virginia region.

Articles 36, 37, and 39 of the Declaration of Rights in the Constitution of the State of Maryland contain language that requires that Marylanders must profess a belief in God in order to act as a witness, serve as a juror, hold "any office of profit or trust in this State," or give an "oath or affirmation." This language is outdated and exclusionary. It suggests that persons who do not profess a belief in a god, specifically the Abrahamic god, or who for personal religious or other reasons choose not to declare their beliefs whatever they may be, cannot be trusted to the same degree as those who do. No evidence whatsoever from anywhere in the world supports such an assertion.

Requiring a declaration of belief in God or any sort of deity runs counter to the principles upon which our nation was founded. As you know, the U.S. Constitution contains only two references to religion, one in Article VI and the other in the First Amendment. Both provisions separate religion from the affairs of state. The framers of the Constitution omitted references to religion from it intentionally and for very good reasons.

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Although federal court rulings in the previous century may have rendered these provisions unenforceable and perhaps legally moot, they nevertheless remain in our state's highest governing document and are offensive to non-religious persons, categorizes us as being less than full citizens, and encourage discrimination against us. Maryland is a highly diverse state in so many ways and none more so than in the religious views of its residents. Marylanders come in all faiths and in none. It is time to bring our state fully into the twenty-first century and amend the state constitution such that it speaks to and protects all Marylanders.

As you know, there is a bill before your committee, HB871, that would remove this outdated and exclusionary language from our state constitution. The changes proposed in HB871 are in no way anti-religious or anti-God as some demagogues might claim. They would simply align our state government with our founding national principles that religion and government are separate matters and that all persons are equal before the law regardless of their religious views. The bill also changes some of the outdated gender-specific language to reflect modern values and norms.

I respectfully request that you fully support this measure and move it forward. I may be contacted by email at mike@wash.org.

Sincerely,

Michael R. Reid

Michael R. Reid
Member of the Board of Directors
The Washington Area Secular Humanists, Inc.