

Thank you, Chair Pena-Melnyk, Vice Chair Cullison, and members of the committee. My name is William Blake, and I am an associate professor in the Department of Political Science at UMBC. Today, I appear in my private capacity to testify in favor of House Bill 822. In my First Amendment Freedoms course, I teach *Torcaso v. Watkins*, where---as others have mentioned---a unanimous Supreme Court held that Article 37 of the Maryland Declaration of Rights violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment.

The Maryland Constitution stands in direct opposition to the U.S. Constitution, which declares in Article VI that “no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States.” It is ironic that Maryland, whose colonial origins are strongly associated with religious tolerance, should today be such a constitutional outlier. Only the constitutions of Arkansas, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas contain religious test provisions.

Members of the committee, you might be tempted to ask, so long as religious tests are unenforceable everywhere, why should we care about a legal dead-letter? Codes of law are rarely as clean or as up to date as we might want. My response is simple: constitutions are more than a set of legal rules, they are a statement of values. It took Alabama until 2020 to repeal the part of its constitution that mandated educational segregation. I challenge any opponent of this bill to clarify whether they would have also opposed Alabama’s recent efforts.

No state can condition access to its justice system or its halls of power on the profession of religious belief and still call itself a democracy. Religious tests are odious to a freedom-loving people, and the Maryland Constitution should say as much. Thank you.