

I strongly oppose this bill because it violates the First Amendment of the United States Constitution. The First Amendment is not a symbolic statement—it is a binding legal safeguard designed to restrain government power. It guarantees the free exercise of religion and the freedom of speech, including political speech, precisely so that the government cannot silence disfavored viewpoints or coerce compliance through punishment.

This bill does exactly what the First Amendment forbids. It conditions nonprofit status on the suppression of speech and grants the State of Maryland the authority to impose financial penalties and revoke income tax, sales tax, and property tax exemptions for churches, parsonages, and religious schools based solely on their speech about candidates or elections. Using the tax code as a weapon to regulate religious and political expression is unconstitutional. Government may not penalize the exercise of fundamental rights, nor may it indirectly accomplish what it is forbidden to do directly.

The Supreme Court has long recognized that political speech lies at the very core of First Amendment protection. Likewise, religious speech does not lose constitutional protection simply because it is expressed by a church or religious institution. This bill imposes a chilling effect on both. Faced with the threat of fines or loss of tax-exempt status, churches will be pressured into silence—not because the Constitution allows it, but because the government seeks to coerce it.

As a Korean American, I am particularly alarmed by this approach. In South Korea, a pastor was imprisoned for expressing his political views. One of the reasons I am proud to be an American is that our constitutional system was deliberately designed to prevent such abuses of government power. When the state begins punishing religious institutions for speaking on matters of public concern, we move away from constitutional democracy and toward authoritarian control. We have seen where that path leads—in places like North Korea, where citizens are denied even the most basic freedom of expression.

This bill sets a dangerous and unconstitutional precedent. It erodes the separation of church and state by allowing the state to dictate the boundaries of permissible religious speech. It undermines core First Amendment protections and threatens the liberties that define this nation.

For these reasons, I strongly and unequivocally oppose this bill.

HooKyung Lee