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February 17 2026

## HB 0356 - UNF

Human Relations - Protection of the Free Exercise of Religion

Dear Chair [Melissa Wells](#), Vice Chair [Delegate Kenneth Kerr](#), and Members of the Government, Labor, and Elections Committee,

By granted religious beliefs a highest priority legal protection whenever such beliefs conflict with state law, enacting this bill would counterproductively undermine law making and enforcement. It is inevitable that enacting and enforcing laws that logically or empirically achieve a proper and meaningful secular government goal will sometimes place a burden on someone's religious beliefs. Our law making and enforcement would be hobbled if it was required to always conform to, accommodate, or otherwise reflect, all of the many different religious beliefs held by state citizens to the fullest extent, and in any way, that is conceivable, as this bill proposes.

Article 36 of the Maryland Declaration of Rights strikes a better balance than this bill, acknowledging that there are sensible limits to religious liberty: "...unless, under the color of religion, he shall disturb good order, peace, or safety of the State, or shall infringe the laws of morality, or injure others in their natural, civil, or religious rights...". People who find a law objectionable on free exercise grounds can challenge the constitutionality

of that law via the judiciary. Free exercise claims are respected and seriously considered by the judiciary in the United States, as they should be. Yet such claims often substantially clash with governing goals. The available evidence regarding benefits versus costs of favoring the free exercise claims over the laws varies by context. When addressing such conflicts we should prioritize logically following the available evidence (instead of prioritizing how numerous, angry, and vocal are the groups making the free exercise claims).

Some religious beliefs sometimes oppose antidiscrimination law provisions, health insurance for medicine, vaccinations and emergency policies against contagious disease, applying bankruptcy laws to religious organizations, licensing requirements, prosecuting clergy for sexual abuse, charging interest on loans, applying the same tax laws on religious organizations that are enforced on non-religious organizations, child neglect laws, drug laws, traffic laws, minimum wage laws, labor laws, animal cruelty laws, education laws, family laws, etc. Secular Maryland favors state law that limits its focus to proper and generic secular governing goals, that is logically a best fit with the relevant available evidence, and that applies equally to all without hundreds of lacey swiss cheese-like carve outs, exemptions, and privileges for religious institutions, religious believers, and parochial interest groups.

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