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March 09, 2026

HB 0036 - FAV

Annotated Code - Terminology - Clergy and Churches, Faith Institutions, and Places of Worship

Dear Chair Anne Healey, Vice-Chair Marvin E. Holmes Jr., and Members of the Rules and Executive Nominations Committee,

This bill eliminates sectarian language in our laws by replacing “church” with either “faith institution” or “place of worship” and replacing “clergyman” with “member of the clergy”. For the same reasons Christians would dislike our laws referring to their house of worship or faith institutions as a “mosque”, non-Christians dislike our laws referring to their house of worship or faith institutions as a “church”. The etymology of the word church is from old English cirice, circe meaning “place of assemblage set aside for Christian worship; the body of Christian believers, Christians collectively; ecclesiastical authority or power”. The extensive use of the Christian word “church”, along with occasional clumsy addition of phrases such as “or synagogue”, “or other”, “or religious denomination”, “of any denomination”, etc., when actually referring to either a faith institution or a house of worship in our laws, is simultaneously confusing and snobbish. Secular Maryland thanks Senator Keagan for sponsoring this bill and calls on all members of this General Assembly to promptly enact this long overdue and common sense rewording of our laws. Maybe in the future we can go one step further than this bill and modify our laws so that both religious and secular institutions and citizens are treated more alike and our laws avoid repeatedly singling out members of clergy, places of worship, and faith institutions for exemptions from laws applying to everyone else or granting legal privileges, such as officiating weddings, not granted to those who do not worship and do not join religious institutions.

Some churches, and some religious institutions that do not consider themselves to be a church, and also some secular institutions, promote pernicious ideas. This is equally true under the existing laws as it will be if the laws are modified as proposed by this bill. Federal law that applies to the states forbids government from discriminating between Christian and non-Christian religions regardless of the biased wording of state laws. We need to counter pernicious ideas with counter speech, and by targeting negative actions

and serious ongoing threats, not with laws excluding some non-Christian based religions from first amendment protections for the purpose of legally discriminating against some minority religious institutions and practices that some biased lawmakers do not approve of.

Make no mistake about this, The Satanic Temple in particular is a good group of law respecting citizens. The Satanic Temple was founded in 2013 as a form of political protest. It emerged in opposition to the George W. Bush administration's White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, aiming to challenge religious favoritism in government policies. The group advocates for the separation of church and state, secularism, and individual liberties through activism and legal challenges. Unlike the Church of Satan, The Satanic Temple is non-theistic and uses Satan as a symbol of rebellion against tyranny and injustice. Its self-declared mission includes promoting empathy, bodily autonomy, and scientific reasoning, as outlined in its "Seven Tenets". That this is one of religious institutions being targeted by some critics of this bill illustrates why elected lawmakers should not be trusted to decide which religious institutions are legally protected and which are not in state statutes.

Respectfully,
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