

Virginia Laws Protecting Religious Freedom*

Constitution of Virginia: [Article I. Bill of Rights, Section 16](#). Free exercise of religion; . . .

That religion or the duty which we owe to our Creator, and the manner of discharging it, can be directed only by reason and conviction, not by force or violence; and, therefore, all men are equally entitled to the free exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience; and that it is the mutual duty of all to practice Christian forbearance, love, and charity towards each other. No man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested, or burthened in his body or goods, **nor shall otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinions or belief; but all men shall be free to profess and by argument to maintain their opinions in matters of religion, and the same shall in nowise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities.** And the General Assembly shall not prescribe any religious test whatever, or confer any peculiar privileges or advantages on any sect or denomination, or pass any law requiring or authorizing any religious society, or the people of any district within this Commonwealth, to levy on themselves or others, any tax for the erection or repair of any house of public worship, or for the support of any church or ministry; but it shall be left free to every person to select his religious instructor, and to make for his support such private contract as he shall please.

Constitution of Virginia: [Article I. Bill of Rights, Section 11](#). Due process of law; . . . prohibited discrimination. . .

That no person shall be deprived of his life, liberty, or property without due process of law; that the General Assembly shall not pass any law impairing the obligation of contracts; and that **the right to be free from any governmental discrimination upon the basis of religious conviction,** race, color, sex, or national origin **shall not be abridged,** except that **the mere separation of the sexes shall not be considered discrimination.**

Constitution of Virginia: [Article I. Bill of Rights, Section 12](#). Freedom of speech and of the press; right peaceably to assemble, and to petition.

That the freedoms of speech and of the press are among the great bulwarks of liberty, and can never be restrained except by despotic governments; that **any citizen may freely speak, write, and publish his sentiments on all subjects,** being responsible for the abuse of that right; that **the General Assembly shall not pass any law abridging the freedom of speech or of the press, nor the right of the people peaceably to assemble,** and to petition the government for the redress of grievances.

Constitution of Virginia: [Article X. Taxation and Finance, Section 6](#). Exempt property.

(a) Except as otherwise provided in this Constitution, **the following property and no other shall be exempt from taxation, State and local,** including inheritance taxes: . . .

(2) **Real estate and personal property owned and exclusively occupied or used by churches or religious bodies for religious worship or for the residences of their ministers.**

Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom: [§ 57-1. Act for religious freedom recited.](#)

The General Assembly, on January 16, 1786, passed an act in the following words:

"Whereas, **Almighty God hath created the mind free; that all attempts to influence it by temporal punishment, or burthens, or by civil incapacitations, tend only to beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness, and are a departure from the plan of the Holy Author of our religion,** who, being Lord both of body and mind, yet chose not to propagate it by coercions on either, as was in his Almighty power to do; **that the impious presumption of legislators and rulers, civil as well as ecclesiastical, who, being themselves but fallible and uninspired men, have assumed dominion over the faith of others, setting up their own opinions and modes of thinking as the only true and infallible, and as such endeavoring to impose them on others, have established and maintained false religions** over the greatest part of the world, and through all time; that to compel a man to furnish contributions of money for the propagation of opinions which he disbelieves, is sinful and tyrannical, and even the forcing him to support this or that teacher of his own religious persuasion, is depriving him of the comfortable liberty of giving his contributions to the particular pastor whose morals he would make his pattern, and whose powers he feels most persuasive to righteousness, and is withdrawing from the ministry those temporary rewards which, proceeding from an approbation of their personal conduct, are an additional incitement to earnest and unremitting labors, for the instruction of mankind; **that our civil rights have no dependence on our religious opinions any more than our opinions in physics or geometry;** that therefore the proscribing any citizen as unworthy the public confidence by laying upon him an incapacity of being called to offices of trust and emolument, unless he profess or renounce this or that religious opinion, is depriving him injuriously of those privileges and advantages to which, in common with his fellow citizens, he has a natural right; that it tends only to corrupt the principles of that religion it is meant to encourage, by bribing, with a monopoly of worldly honors and emoluments, those who will externally profess and conform to it; that though, indeed, those are criminal who do not withstand such temptation, yet, neither are those innocent who lay the bait in their way; **that to suffer the civil magistrate to intrude his powers into the field of opinion, and to restrain the profession or propagation of principles on supposition of their ill tendency, is a dangerous fallacy, which at once destroys all religious liberty, because he, being of course judge of that tendency, will make his opinions the rules of judgment, and approve or condemn the sentiments of others only as they shall square with or differ from his own; that it is time enough for the rightful purposes of civil government, for its officers to interfere, when principles break out into overt acts against peace and good order;** and finally, that truth is great and will prevail, if left to herself; that she is the proper and sufficient antagonist to error, and has nothing to fear from the conflict, unless by human interposition disarmed of her natural weapons, free argument and debate; errors ceasing to be dangerous when it is permitted freely to contradict them:

"Be it enacted by the General Assembly, That no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested or burthened, in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinions or belief; but that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge or affect their civil capacities.

"And though we well know that this Assembly, elected by the people for the ordinary purposes of legislation only, have no power to restrain the acts of succeeding assemblies constituted with powers equal to our own, and that, therefore, to declare this act to be irrevocable would be of no effect in law; yet **we are free to declare, and do declare, that the rights hereby asserted are of the natural rights of mankind; and that if any act shall be hereafter passed to repeal the present, or to narrow its operation, such act will be an infringement of natural right.**"

Reaffirmation of VA Statute for Religious Freedom: [§ 57-2. Rights asserted therein reaffirmed.](#)

The General Assembly does hereby declare again that **the rights asserted in § 57-1 are the natural and unalienable rights of mankind and this declaration is the policy of the Commonwealth of Virginia.**

Virginia Religious Freedom Restoration Act: [§ 57-2.02. Religious freedom preserved; definitions; applicability; construction; remedies.](#)

A. As used in this section:

"Demonstrates" means meets the burdens of going forward with the evidence and of persuasion under the standard of clear and convincing evidence.

"Exercise of religion" means the exercise of religion under Article I, Section 16 of the Constitution of Virginia, the Virginia Act for Religious Freedom (§ 57-1 et seq.), and the First Amendment to the United States Constitution.

"Government entity" means any branch, department, agency, or instrumentality of state government, or any official or other person acting under color of state law, or any political subdivision of the Commonwealth and does not include the Department of Corrections, the Department of Juvenile Justice, and any facility of the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services that treats civilly committed sexually violent predators, or any local, regional or federal correctional facility.

"Prevails" means to obtain "prevailing party" status as defined by courts construing the federal Civil Rights Attorney's Fees Awards Act of 1976, 42 U.S.C. § 1988.

"Substantially burden" means to inhibit or curtail religiously motivated practice.

B. No government entity shall substantially burden a person's free exercise of religion even if the burden results from a rule of general applicability unless it demonstrates that application of the burden to the person is (i) essential to further a compelling governmental interest and (ii) the least restrictive means of furthering that compelling governmental interest.

C. Nothing in this section shall be construed to (i) authorize any government entity to burden any religious belief or (ii) affect, interpret or in any way address those portions of Article 1, Section 16 of the Constitution of Virginia, the Virginia Act for Religious Freedom (§ 57-1 et seq.), and the First Amendment to the United States Constitution that prohibit laws respecting the establishment of religion. Granting government funds, benefits or exemptions, to the extent permissible under clause (ii) of this subsection, shall not constitute a violation of this section. As used in this subsection, "granting" used with respect to government funding, benefits, or exemptions shall not include the denial of government funding, benefits, or exemptions.

D. A person whose religious exercise has been burdened by government in violation of this section may assert that violation as a claim or defense in any judicial or administrative proceeding and may obtain declaratory and injunctive relief from a circuit court, but shall not obtain monetary damages. A person who prevails in any proceeding to enforce this section against a government entity may recover his reasonable costs and attorney fees. The provisions of this subsection relating to attorney fees shall not apply to criminal prosecutions.

E. Nothing in this section shall prevent any governmental institution or facility from maintaining health, safety, security or discipline.

F. The decision of the circuit court to grant or deny declaratory and injunctive relief may be appealed by petition to the Court of Appeals of Virginia.

Virginia Human Rights Act

[§ 2.2-3901. Definitions.](#)

E. **As used in this chapter**, unless the context requires a different meaning:

"Religion" includes any outward expression of religious faith, including adherence to religious dressing and grooming practices and the carrying or display of religious items or symbols.

[§ 2.2-3904. Nondiscrimination in places of public accommodation; definitions.](#)

B. It is an unlawful discriminatory practice for any person, including the owner, lessee, proprietor, manager, superintendent, agent, or employee of any place of public accommodation, to refuse, withhold from, or deny any individual, or to attempt to refuse, withhold from, or deny any individual, directly or indirectly, any of the accommodations, advantages, facilities, services, or privileges made available in any place of public accommodation, or to segregate or discriminate against any such person in the use thereof, or to publish, circulate, issue, display, post, or mail, either directly or indirectly, any communication, notice, or advertisement to the effect that any of the accommodations, advantages, facilities, privileges, or services of any such place shall be refused, withheld from, or denied to any individual **on the basis of ... religion**...

C. The provisions of this section shall not apply to a private club, a place of accommodation owned by or operated on behalf of a religious corporation, association, or society **that is not in fact open to the public**...

[§ 2.2-3905. Nondiscrimination in employment; definitions; exceptions.](#)

B. It is an unlawful discriminatory practice for:

1. An employer to:

a. Fail or refuse to hire, discharge, or otherwise discriminate against any individual with respect to such individual's compensation, terms, conditions, or privileges of employment because of such individual's ... religion...; or

b. Limit, segregate, or classify employees or applicants for employment in any way that would deprive or tend to deprive any individual of employment opportunities or otherwise adversely affect an individual's status as an employee, because of such individual's ... religion...

E. The provisions of this section shall not apply to the employment of individuals of a particular religion by a religious corporation, association, educational institution, or society to perform work associated with its activities.

Minister Protections for Officiating Weddings: [§ 20-23. Order authorizing ministers to perform ceremony.](#)

When a minister of any religious denomination produces before the circuit court of any county or city in the Commonwealth, or before the judge of such court or before the clerk of such court at any time, proof of his ordination and of his being in regular communion with the religious society of which he is a reputed member, or proof that he is commissioned to pastoral ministry or holds a local minister's license and is serving as a regularly appointed pastor in his denomination, such court, or the judge thereof, or the clerk of such court at any time, may make an order authorizing such minister to celebrate the rites of matrimony in the Commonwealth. Any order made under this section may be rescinded at any time by the court or by the judge thereof. **No oath shall be required of a minister authorized to celebrate the rites of matrimony, nor shall such minister be considered an officer of the Commonwealth by virtue of such authorization.**