

**Proponent Testimony: HB 353 – Testing Your Faith Act**  
**Ohio Senate | Committee on Workforce & Higher Education**  
**November 30, 2022 | Columbus, OH**

Chairman Johnson, Vice Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Martin, and members of the Senate Workforce & Higher Education Committee:

### **Introduction**

Convergence Strategies is a national organization working on behalf of religious, secular, and spiritual identities in higher education. Created in 2017 to advocate for professional practice, research, and policy to support religious equity, Convergence Strategies addresses needs of millions of college students who are asking their institutions to simply support identities as has been provided by the U.S. Constitution. As Executive Director of the organization, I submit the following on our organization's behalf.

### **Background and Statement of Interest**

We are grateful to both Representatives Click and Miranda for leading on this issue and championing this legislation. We're equally grateful for the Leadership of the Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee, specifically Chairman Johnson, Vice Chair Cirino, and Ranking Member Martin for moving forward this legislation in Ohio.

The First Amendment, its final language ratified on December 15, 1791, has stood for more than 240 years as a benchmark of nonpartisanship and inclusion within the American experience. Its careful balance of maintaining religious freedom while also not falling victim to establishment of preference of one religion within the American ethos is a testament to not only the founders, but of the thousands of individuals who have taken oaths to protect and defend the Constitution.

Yet, it took more than 90 years for this First Amendments' freedoms to be applied to all citizens, and in the form of the Fourteenth Amendment and its author the Ohioan John Bingham. This dual application of the First and Fourteenth Amendments and the religious protections provided all citizens of the United States is why we are here today and why this bill has come to this chamber.

Higher Education as an institution in the United States, like all institutions, is largely driven by what we call the Gregorian Calendar, an established structure that drives our society from January 1- December 31<sup>st</sup> each year and pausing often to honor certain religious holidays, all of which are Christian in nature. This setting of higher education can be attributed by many of us as the launching points for our careers and arguably and historically for many of the social issues we discuss in this chamber today. And within higher education, thousands of students in Ohio are forced to choose between their religious rights or practice and the requirements to attend classes and even to be tested in religious holidays.

When our organization first proposed a similar bill as the one before you in Washington State, we were expecting that in an era of partisanship this issue would once again be met with division. We were wrong, and in 2019 Washington State passed a nearly unanimous approval of religious accommodations that now affects more than 700 institutions and 400,000 students in Washington. Last year, a similar bill was passed in Utah, and once again the spirit of bipartisanship was present, as the bill passed without a single dissenting

vote. Now, further bills in Michigan, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Wisconsin, California, and Texas as are in the works or on file.

This piece of legislation speaks to the First Amendment freedoms all of us are afforded, but oftentimes not awarded. A uniform law passed across Ohio would provide all students on all campuses with that afforded freedom equitably, and would create an opportunity for conversations on our campuses about the importance of overcoming religious-based discrimination, something many of those supporting the bill today have known far too well.

I ask you as members of this committee and all members of this chamber to pass this legislation. And I ask you to do it unanimously, as a passage of a bill of this importance during a time of deep partisanship can not only send a message that legislators can work together, but that a bill like this should be taken up and passed with the same enthusiasm and nonpartisanship by other states. I invite you as Ohioans to set the benchmark and for the committee and the chamber to vote yes on the passage of this bill and help all Ohioans to be supported in their religious and spiritual identities.

---

Dr. J Cody Nielsen  
Executive Director  
Convergence Strategies  
319 759 9688  
[j.cody.nielsen@convergencestrategies.org](mailto:j.cody.nielsen@convergencestrategies.org)