House Bill 757 (AS PASSED HOUSE AND SENATE)
By: Representatives Tanner of the 9th, Nix of the 69th, Battles of the 15th, Powell of the 171st, Hatchett of the 150th, and others

A BILL TO BE ENTITLED
AN ACT

To protect religious freedoms; to provide for defenses and relief related thereto; to amend Chapter 3 of Title 19 of the Official Code of Georgia Annotated, relating to marriage generally, so as to provide that religious officials shall not be required to perform marriage ceremonies, perform rites, or administer sacraments in violation of their legal right to free exercise of religion; to provide that no individual shall be required to attend the solemnization of a marriage, performance of rites, or administration of sacraments in violation of their legal right to free exercise of religion; to amend Chapter 1 of Title 10 of the Official Code of Georgia Annotated, relating to selling and other trade practices, so as to change certain provisions relating to days of rest for employees of business and industry; to protect property owners which are faith based organizations against infringement of religious freedom; to protect certain providers of services against infringement of religious freedom; to amend Chapter 1 of Title 34 of the Official Code of Georgia Annotated, relating to labor and industrial relations generally, so as to provide that faith based organizations shall not be required to hire or retain certain persons as employees; to amend Title 50 of the Official Code of Georgia Annotated, relating to state government, so as to provide for the preservation of religious freedom; to provide for the granting of relief; to provide for waiver of sovereign immunity under certain circumstances; to provide for definitions; to provide for ante litem notices; to provide a short title; to provide for related matters; to provide for an effective date; to repeal conflicting laws; and for other purposes.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF GEORGIA:

SECTION 1.
This Act shall be known and may be cited as the "Free Exercise Protection Act."

SECTION 2.
Chapter 3 of Title 19 of the Official Code of Georgia Annotated, relating to marriage generally, is amended by adding a new Code section to read as follows:
"19-3-11.

(a) As used in this Code section, the term 'government' means the state or any political subdivision of the state or public instrumentality or public corporate body created by or under authority of state law.

(b) All individuals who are ministers of the gospel or clerics or religious practitioners ordained or authorized to solemnize marriages, perform rites, or administer sacraments according to the usages of the denomination shall be free to solemnize any marriage, perform any rite, or administer any sacrament or to decline to do the same, in their discretion, in the exercise of their rights to free exercise of religion under the Constitution of this state or of the United States.

(c)(1) A refusal by an ordained or authorized individual pursuant to subsection (b) of this Code section shall not give rise to a civil claim or cause of action against such individual or result in any state action to penalize, withhold benefits from, or discriminate against such individual based on such refusal.

(2) A refusal by an ordained or authorized individual pursuant to subsection (b) of this Code section shall not be grounds to:

(A) Alter in any way state tax treatment of an exemption from taxation for such individual under state law;

(B) Cause any tax, penalty, or payment to be assessed against such individual or deny, delay, or revoke an exemption from taxation for such individual under state law; or

(C) Disallow a deduction for state tax purposes of any charitable contribution made by such individual.

(d) All individuals shall be free to attend or not attend, at their discretion, the solemnization of any marriage, performance of any rite, or administration of any sacrament in the exercise of their rights to free exercise of religion under the Constitution of this state or of the United States.

(e) An individual may assert a violation of this Code section by a government as a claim or defense in a judicial, agency, or other proceeding and obtain a declaratory judgment or injunctive relief in a court of competent jurisdiction.

(f) When an aggrieved individual prevails in an action pursuant to this Code section, the court may award reasonable attorney's fees and court costs.

(g) No individual having a claim against a government under this Code section shall bring any such action without first giving notice of the claim to such government, in writing, by certified mail or statutory overnight delivery, at least 30 days prior to filing such action, setting forth the particular prohibited action alleged to have been taken by the government against such individual."
SECTION 3.
Chapter 1 of Title 10 of the Official Code of Georgia Annotated, relating to selling and other trade practices, is amended by revising Code Section 10-1-573, relating to day of rest for employees of business and industry, as follows:

“10-1-573.
(a) Any business or industry which operates on either of the two rest days (Saturday or Sunday) and employs those whose habitual day of worship has been chosen by the employer as a day of work shall make all reasonable accommodations to the religious, social, and physical needs of such employees so that those employees may enjoy the same benefits as employees in other occupations.
(b) No business or industry shall be required by ordinance or resolution of any county, municipality, or consolidated government to operate on either of the two rest days (Saturday or Sunday).”

SECTION 4.
Said chapter is further amended by adding a new article to read as follows:

"ARTICLE 35
10-1-1000.
As used in this article, the term:
(1) 'Faith based organization' means a church, a religious school, an association or convention of churches, a convention mission agency, or an integrated auxiliary of a church or convention or association of churches, when such entity is qualified as an exempt religious organization under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code of 1986, as amended.
(2) 'Government' means the state or any political subdivision of the state or public instrumentality or public corporate body created by or under authority of state law.

10-1-1001.
(a) No faith based organization shall be required to rent, lease, or otherwise grant permission for property to be used by another person for an event which is objectionable to such faith based organization.
(b) No faith based organization shall be required to provide social, educational, or charitable services that violate such faith based organization's sincerely held religious belief as demonstrated by its practice, expression, or clearly articulated tenet of faith; provided,
however, that government may enforce the terms of a grant, contract, or other agreement voluntarily entered into by such faith based organization.

10-1-1002.

(a) (1) A refusal by a faith based organization pursuant to Code Section 10-1-1001 shall not give rise to a civil claim or cause of action against such faith based organization or an employee thereof or result in any state action to penalize, withhold benefits from, or discriminate against the faith based organization or employee based on such refusal.

(2) A refusal by a faith based organization pursuant to Code Section 10-1-1001 shall not be grounds to:

(A) Alter in any way state tax treatment of an exemption from taxation for such faith based organization under state law;

(B) Cause any tax, penalty, or payment to be assessed against such faith based organization or deny, delay, or revoke an exemption from taxation for such faith based organization under state law; or

(C) Disallow a deduction for state tax purposes of any charitable contribution made by or to such faith based organization.

(b) A faith based organization may assert a violation of this Code section by a government as a claim or defense in a judicial, agency, or other proceeding and obtain a declaratory judgment or injunctive relief in a court of competent jurisdiction.

(c) When an aggrieved faith based organization prevails in an action pursuant to this Code section, the court may award reasonable attorney's fees and court costs.

(d) No faith based organization having a claim against a government under this Code section shall bring any such action without first giving notice of the claim to such government, in writing, by certified mail or statutory overnight delivery, at least 30 days prior to filing such action, setting forth the particular prohibited action alleged to have been taken by the government against such faith based organization."

SECTION 5.

Chapter 1 of Title 34 of the Official Code of Georgia Annotated, relating to labor and industrial relations generally, is amended by adding a new Code section to read as follows:

"34-1-9.

(a) As used in this Code section, the term:

(1) 'Faith based organization' means a church, a religious school, an association or convention of churches, a convention mission agency, or an integrated auxiliary of a church or convention or association of churches, when such entity is qualified as an
exempt religious organization under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code of 1986, as amended.

(2) 'Government' means the state or any political subdivision of the state or public instrumentality or public corporate body created by or under authority of state law.

(b) Except as provided by the Constitution of this state or the United States or federal law, no faith based organization shall be required to hire or retain as an employee any person whose religious beliefs or practices or lack of either are not in accord with the faith based organization's sincerely held religious belief as demonstrated by practice, expression, or clearly articulated tenet of faith.

(c)(1) A refusal by a faith based organization to hire or retain a person pursuant to subsection (b) of this Code section shall not give rise to a civil claim or cause of action against such faith based organization or an employee thereof or result in any state action to penalize, withhold benefits from, or discriminate against the faith based organization or employee based on such refusal.

(2) A refusal by a faith based organization to hire or retain a person pursuant to subsection (b) of this Code section shall not be grounds to:

(A) Alter in any way state tax treatment of an exemption from taxation for such faith based organization under state law;

(B) Cause any tax, penalty, or payment to be assessed against such faith based organization or deny, delay, or revoke an exemption from taxation for such faith based organization under state law; or

(C) Disallow a deduction for state tax purposes of any charitable contribution made by or to such faith based organization.

(d) A faith based organization may assert a violation of this Code section by a government as a claim or defense in a judicial, agency, or other proceeding and obtain a declaratory judgment or injunctive relief in a court of competent jurisdiction.

(e) When an aggrieved faith based organization prevails in an action pursuant to this Code section, the court may award reasonable attorney's fees and court costs.

(f) No faith based organization having a claim against a government under this Code section shall bring any such action without first giving notice of the claim to such government, in writing, by certified mail or statutory overnight delivery, at least 30 days prior to filing such action, setting forth the particular prohibited action alleged to have been taken by the government against such faith based organization.”

SECTION 6.

Title 50 of the Official Code of Georgia Annotated, relating to state government, is amended by adding a new chapter to read as follows:
CHAPTER 15A

50-15A-1.

As used in this chapter, the term:

(1) 'Delinquent act' shall have the same meaning as provided for in Code Section 15-11-2.

(2) 'Demonstrates' means meets the burdens of going forward with the evidence and of persuasion.

(3) 'Exercise of religion' means the exercise of religion pursuant to Paragraphs III and IV of Section I, Article I of the Constitution of this state or the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States.

(4) 'Government' means the state or any political subdivision of the state or public instrumentality or public corporate body created by or under authority of state law.

(5) 'Penal institution' means any jail, correctional institution, or similar facility for the detention of violators of state laws or local ordinances and any entity supervising such violators placed on parole, probation, or other conditional release and any facility for the restrictive custody of children and any entity supervising children who are not in restrictive custody but who are accused of or adjudicated for a delinquent act.

(6) 'Restrictive custody' shall have the same meaning as provided for in Code Section 15-11-2.


(a) Government shall not substantially burden a person's exercise of religion even if the burden results from a law, rule, regulation, ordinance, or resolution of general applicability, except as provided in subsection (b) of this Code section.

(b) Government may substantially burden a person's exercise of religion only if it demonstrates that application of the burden to the person is:

(1) In furtherance of a compelling governmental interest; and

(2) The least restrictive means of furthering that compelling governmental interest.

(c) A person whose exercise of religion has been burdened in violation of this Code section may assert that violation as a claim or defense in a judicial proceeding and obtain a declaratory judgment or injunctive relief against a government.

50-15A-3.

In any action or proceeding to enforce a provision of this chapter, the court or tribunal may allow the prevailing party, other than government, reasonable attorney's fees and court costs.

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50-15A-4.
No person having a claim under this chapter shall bring any action against government
without first giving notice of the claim to such government, in writing, by certified mail or
statutory overnight delivery, at least 30 days prior to filing such action, setting forth the
particular discriminatory action alleged to have been taken by the government against such
person.

50-15A-5.
(a) With respect to interactions which affect the rights or interests of third persons, this
chapter shall be construed consistent with Article I, Section I, Paragraphs III and IV of the
Constitution of Georgia and consistent with decisions of the Georgia Supreme Court made
pursuant to said paragraphs.
(b) Nothing in this chapter shall be construed to:
(1) Permit invidious discrimination on any grounds prohibited by federal or state law;
(2) Apply to penological rules, regulations, conditions, or policies established by a penal
institution that are reasonably related to the safety and security of incarcerated persons,
staff, visitors, supervised violators, or the public, or to the maintenance of good order and
discipline in any penal institution or parole or probation program;
(3) Create any rights by an employee against an employer, if such employer is not a
government; or
(4) Afford any protection or relief to a public officer or employee who fails or refuses
to perform his or her official duties; provided, however, that this paragraph shall not
prohibit any person from holding any public office or trust on account of religious
opinions, in accordance with Paragraph IV of Section I of Article I of the Constitution."

SECTION 7.
Said title is further amended by adding a new Code section to read as follows:
"50-21-38.
The defense of sovereign immunity is waived as to any claim, counterclaim, cross-claim,
or third-party claim brought in the courts of this state by an aggrieved individual or faith
based organization seeking a declaratory judgment, injunctive relief, or reasonable
attorney's fees and court costs against the state as provided for in Code Section 19-3-11,
Article 35 of Chapter 1 of Title 10, Code Section 34-1-9, or Chapter 15A of this title. In
any such case, the applicable provisions of said Code sections, article, or chapter shall
control to the extent of any conflict with the provisions of this article."
SECTION 8.

This Act shall become effective upon its approval by the Governor or upon its becoming law without such approval.

SECTION 9.

All laws and parts of laws in conflict with this Act are repealed.