

California Christian Colleges Breathe a Sigh of Relief

Facing what the Los Angeles Times called “intense opposition from religious colleges in California,” state Sen. Ricardo Lara (D-Bell Gardens) has removed a provision that would have stripped those schools of their religious liberty protections and made it easier for LGBT students to sue for “discrimination.”

“The goal for me has always been to shed the light on the appalling and unacceptable discrimination against LGBT students at these private religious institutions throughout California,” Lara told the Times on Wednesday. “I don’t want to just rush a bill that’s going to have unintended consequences so I want to take a break to really study this issue further.”

The bill will still include a provision that requires religious schools to report expulsions based on morality codes to the state Commission on Student Aid. Lara, who is openly homosexual, said that provision will allow him to see just how common such expulsions are and whether or not his now-tabled provision should be brought back up for consideration.

The bill faced opposition from a number of groups spanning a diversity of religions, not just Christian schools—the primary target of the legislation. They issued a joint statement just prior to Lara’s announcement that he was removing the provision on the Southern Baptist Convention’s Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission website, which said:

The California Assembly has proposed legislation that is harmful to the free exercise of religion in higher education. In particular, the legislation disadvantages low-income minority students who want an education at private

religious colleges. Though it purports to eliminate discrimination, Senate Bill 1146 results in its own form of discrimination by stigmatizing and coercively punishing religious beliefs that disagree on contested matters related to human sexuality. If SB 1146 were to pass, it would deny students' ability to participate in state grant programs—programs that exist to help low-income students, and which are overwhelmingly used by racial minorities—at schools that are found in violation of the bill. Moreover, it would severely restrict the ability of religious education institutions to set expectations of belief and conduct that align with the institution's religious tenets. While we do not all agree on religious matters, we all agree that the government has no place in discriminating against poor religious minorities or in pitting a religious education institution's faith-based identity against its American identity. This legislation puts into principle that majoritarian beliefs are more deserving of legal protection, and that minority viewpoints are deserving of government harassment. Legislation of this nature threatens the integrity not only of religious institutions, but of any viewpoint wishing to exercise basic American freedoms, not least of which is the freedom of conscience.

We, the undersigned, do not necessarily agree with one another's religious views, but we agree on the necessity of the liberty to exercise these views. At the root of the American experiment is the idea that conscience and religious conviction come before the demands of the state. Some of us disagree with the sexual ethics of orthodox Jews, Christians, and Muslims giving rise to this legislation, but we are unified in our resistance to the government setting up its own system of orthodoxy. As the American Founding Father Benjamin Franklin once said, "We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately." No less is this true than on matters of religious liberty. Where the state can encroach on one religion's free

exercise, it can just as easily trample on any other religion's free exercise. We therefore join in solidarity across religious lines to speak against Senate Bill 1146.

We call on the California Assembly to abandon Senate Bill 1146. *To ensure the future of the free exercise of religion in higher education in California and across America, we respectfully call on the supporters of Senate Bill 1146 to immediately withdraw their support of this bill, with the commitment to disavow similar intrusions in the future. Opposition to this bill is not grounded in the protection of religious liberty only, nor for the special pleading of one religion in particular, but for the protection of American society and American democracy. Such protection requires a civil society welcoming of religious diversity.*

The future of a free America requires the full participation of religion in public life. *Religious higher education cultivates both the mind and the soul. Senate Bill 1146 endangers the integrity of religious education institutions and discourages them from acting according to their conscience for fear of government retribution. As Americans with a rich legacy of freedoms afforded to us by the laws of nature and of nature's God, and enshrined in the Constitution, we can do better. As we renew our commitment to religious pluralism in the public square, we should embrace debate, welcome dissent, and encourage civility as we work together for the sake of the common good and of a country we are all unreservedly blessed to call our home.*

Those who have signed the letter represent a diverse cross-section of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim faith leaders. [Click here to see the entire list.](#)