



Faith . Freedom . **For All.**

Testimony of Amanda Tyler,
On behalf of BJC (Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty)

Before the
House Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee on the Constitution and Limited Government

Hearing: "Sharia-Free America: Why Political Islam & Sharia Law are Incompatible with the
U.S. Constitution: Part II"

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I. Introduction

Good morning. I am Amanda Tyler, executive director of Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty (BJC). As a constitutional attorney and Baptist Christian lay leader, I am honored to be here to offer testimony this morning about how targeting individuals and groups based on religion violates our country's constitutional commitment to religious freedom for all.

For 90 years, BJC has worked to advance faith freedom for all, bringing a uniquely Baptist witness to the principle that faith must be freely chosen and exercised, neither advanced nor inhibited by government. BJC is composed of more than a dozen Baptist organizations and supported by thousands of individuals and Baptist churches across the country.

BJC has a consistent record of supporting both of the First Amendment's religion clauses — No Establishment and Free Exercise. BJC chaired the diverse Coalition for the Free Exercise of Religion that pushed for passage of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993 and the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act of 2000. Our commitment to religious freedom stems from the historical experiences of early Baptists, who suffered the pain of persecution that resulted from religious fervor coupled with the coercive power of the state.

II. Religious freedom for all is an American value and a Baptist value.

In this 250th year of American independence, our country has the opportunity to reaffirm the foundational values that unite our diverse people. Core to what it means to be an American is a rich religious freedom tradition that protects the free exercise of religion of all people by ensuring that government not single out any one religion for special favor or disapproval.

Our founders made a deliberate choice to disestablish religion from government control. They did so with the experience of government establishments of religion in the places they emigrated from and in the British colonies.

Baptists were instrumental in advocacy for religious freedom for all people in the United States. This advocacy predates American independence by more than 150 years. Thomas Helwys, the co-founder of the Baptist movement, wrote *A Short Declaration on the Mystery of Iniquity* in 1612. This work is considered the first defense of universal religious freedom written in English. In it, Helwys wrote to King James I about the importance of freedom of conscience for all people, including Muslims: “For men’s religion to God is betwixt God and themselves. The king shall not answer for it. Neither may the king be judge between God and person. Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews, or whatsoever, it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure. This is made evident to our lord the king by the scriptures.”

Roger Williams, likewise, advocated for religious freedom for a pluralistic society in 1644 in *The Bloody Tenent*.¹ “It is the will and command of God, that since the coming of his Son the Lord Jesus, a permission of the most Paganish, Jewish, Turkish, or anti-Christian consciences and worships, be granted in all nations and countries: and they are only to be fought with that sword which is only in soul matters able to conquer, with the sword of God’s Spirit, the Word of God.”

John Leland, a Virginia Baptist pastor who was a neighbor and contemporary of James Madison, also wrote about the importance of government protection for all beliefs. In 1791 Leland wrote, “Let every person speak freely without fear, maintain the principles that he believes, worship according to his own faith, either one God, three Gods, no God, or twenty Gods; and let government protect him in doing so.”

Religious dissenters, including Baptists, organized citizen petition drives in Virginia to pave the way for the eventual introduction and passage of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, a precursor to the First Amendment of the Constitution.

Fortunately, the lessons of history and commitments of these forebears are reflected in our Constitution’s protection of religious freedom, including the ban on religious tests for public office in Article VI, as well as the protection of the free exercise of religion and prohibition against government establishment of religion in the First Amendment. Those protections are for all.

III. Government action that singles out a group of people for heightened scrutiny based on religion violates religious freedom.

As this history informs us, religious liberty is a fundamental commitment, and it should protect all religions. Religious freedom depends on government remaining neutral when it comes to religion, neither favoring nor denigrating any religious viewpoint held by individuals and groups.

¹ The full title of this work is *The Bloody Tenent, of Persecution, for cause of Conscience, discussed, in a Conference betweene Truth and Peace.*

In fact, that principle—avoiding official approval or disapproval of religions—to safeguard religious freedom was unanimously reaffirmed just last year by the U.S. Supreme Court. The Court reiterated that “[t]he clearest command of the Establishment Clause” is that the government may not “officially prefe[r]” one religious denomination over another, nor pass laws that “aid or oppose” particular religions.² This reflects the founding concerns about the harms to religion that come from failing to separate the institutions of religion and government.

Anti-Muslim government action violates that clear command. Even *proposed* legislation targeting a particular religion can undercut our fundamental religious freedom by perpetuating harmful stereotypes and misinformation about Islam and Muslims. Public policy should reflect our highest values, including the commitment to equal citizenship without regard to religion. It should not be based on disapproval of particular religions.

We have seen government initiatives that focus on adherence to Sharia law as a way of sowing anti-Muslim fear in the past. Such efforts have been particularly pernicious. Beginning around 2010, a wave of Sharia law bans was proposed, including in two dozen states. Such misguided efforts operate to stoke fear and harm religious freedom. While courts can strike laws that target religion for official disapproval as unconstitutional—as federal courts did when Oklahoma passed an anti-Sharia law ban by ballot initiative—such efforts should never be considered under our constitutional order.³ They should be rejected as threats to religious freedom for all.

Unfortunately, today we are seeing a resurgence—nationally and particularly in my home state of Texas—of such efforts. Examples include:

- The creation and rapid growth of the “Sharia-Free America Caucus”
- Introduction of legislation that would base immigration policy on adherence to Sharia law
- The proliferation of anti-Muslim and anti-Sharia rhetoric in campaign ads during the 2026 Republican primary⁴
- Texas’s attempt to exclude Muslim schools from its new school voucher program, which was rebuffed by a federal court⁵
- Anti-Sharia focus at recent Texas State Board of Education hearings over curriculum and social studies standards⁶

Efforts like these sow misunderstanding about Islam and Sharia, which means “the path to water” and refers to the religious law that guides Muslims in their beliefs and actions. This broad denigration of Sharia directly impacts approximately 1% of the U.S. population, or an estimated 3.5-4.5 million American Muslims. Rather than single out a single religion and religious people

² See *Cath. Charities Bureau, Inc. v. Wis. Lab. & Ind. Rev. Comm’n*, 605 U.S. 238, 247 (2025) (internal citations omitted).

³ See *Awad v. Ziriax*, 670 F.3d 1111 (10th Cir. 2012).

⁴ J. David Goodman, “Without a Border ‘Invasion,’ Texas G.O.P. Turns to an Old Enemy, Islam,” *New York Times*, Feb. 10, 2026.

⁵ J. David Goodman, “As Muslim private schools try to join Texas’ new voucher program, top Republicans have vowed to stop what they call ‘radical Islamic indoctrination,’” *New York Times*, Apr. 3, 2026.

⁶ Jaden Edison, “Portrayals of Islam and people of color dominate discussion in Texas’ social studies rewrite,” *The Texas Tribune*, Apr. 10, 2026.

for government scorn, we are called to reaffirm our country's core commitment to religious freedom and resist government action that undermines pluralism and religious freedom for all.

IV. Anti-Muslim government action harms all Americans.

Particularly at a time of rising political violence, targeting groups based on perceived differences threatens to exacerbate tensions and contribute to a culture of fear, discrimination, and violence.

The Institute for Social Policy and Understanding published its annual National Islamophobia Index at the end of 2025.⁷ It found a sharp increase in the degree of endorsement of anti-Muslim stereotypes compared to previous years. It also found that Muslims are the religious group most likely to report experiencing religious discrimination and the only religious subgroup in which a majority reported such discrimination. This includes *social* discrimination—among peers—as well as *structural* discrimination—such as in employment, immigration proceedings, and health care. Almost half of Muslim families with children in K-12 reported their child was bullied for their religious identity—twice as much as the general public. Roughly half said the bullying came from another student, and half said from an adult—either a teacher or a classmate's parent.

When the government itself targets religious groups with broad generalizations and baseless accusations, it only adds to the culture of discrimination that already harms Muslim families and children. It models bullying rather than respect.

What's more, this targeting doesn't just harm Muslims. When any person's religious freedom is threatened or diminished, it weakens everyone's religious freedom. Congress—indeed all government officials—should avoid creating a climate where it is acceptable to target a particular faith community for discrimination, harassment, and violence.

V. Conclusion

Religious freedom is foundational to what it means to be an American. Our country's leaders should be actively working to make the promise of full belonging without regard to religion a reality for all, not fearmongering and distorting one religious tradition for perceived political gain.

⁷ Available at <https://ispu.org/poll/american-muslim-poll-20250-full-report-4/>.