



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on April 3, 2014

Mississippi Lawmakers Pass Important Religious Freedom Bill

The Mississippi legislature has given final passage to a bill that will protect citizens against state intrusion into their right to religious expression. Mississippi Governor Phil Bryant has indicated that he will sign the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (SB 2681), which is similar to a measure vetoed earlier this year by Republican Arizona Governor Jan Brewer.



Among other things, the bill will ensure that Mississippi business owners, such as photographers and wedding cake bakers, can refuse to serve homosexuals if they feel that doing so would violate their religious beliefs and moral convictions. "State action or an action by any person based on state action shall not burden a person's right to exercise of religion, even if the burden results from a rule of general applicability," reads the bill, the only exception being a compelling government interest to the contrary.

The bill defines free religious expression as the ability of one "to act or the refusal to act in a manner that is substantially motivated by one's sincerely held religious belief, whether or not the exercise is compulsory or central to a larger system of religious belief."

The bill, introduced by Republican State Senator Phillip Gandy, who is also a Baptist pastor, passed in the House by a 79-43 vote and in the Senate 37-14. Opponents of the bill portrayed it as potentially discriminatory to homosexuals, a charge Gandy denied, telling OneNewsNow.com that "either they haven't read the bill or ... they're just trying to frighten people, and there are some people who do that really well. When they don't have a good argument, they attack — and certainly we've seen a lot of that."

Gandy emphasized that the sole purpose of the bill is to shield people of faith so that if laws or ordinances are passed at a local, county, or state level that infringe on religious liberty, then faith-minded citizens "would have this law as their defense — and government would have to prove that there was a compelling state interest to unnecessarily burden a person's religious rights."

Critics of the bill warned that the new law will lead to business owners refusing to serve homosexuals based on moral and religious opposition to that lifestyle. Arizona's governor was pressured to veto her state's religious freedom bill in part because of threats of an economic boycott if it became law.

The ACLU was at the forefront of opposition to the bill, noting that Georgia, Idaho, Maine, and Ohio were among the states to reject bills that would protect the religious freedoms of their citizens. "We remain hopeful that courts throughout the state will reject any attempts to use religion to justify discrimination," said Jennifer Riley-Collins a spokesperson for the ACLU's Mississippi franchise, following the bill's passage. "Nobody should be refused service because of who they are."

Andy Gipson, the Republican chairman of the House Judiciary Committee and a supporter of the bill, noted that similar legislation "has been passed by 18 other states, and has been in federal law for years and years with no issues, no discrimination." Gipson assured that the new law would "not discriminate,



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but what it does do is protect people from discrimination — religious people in the state of Mississippi.” Among those applauding the bill’s passage was Tony Perkins of the conservative [Family Research Council](#), who said it represented a “victory for the First Amendment and the right to live and work according to one’s conscience. This commonsense measure was a no-brainer for freedom, and like the federal [Religious Freedom Restoration Act], it simply bars government discrimination against religious exercise. The legislature gave strong approval to a bill that declares that individuals do not have to trade their religious freedom for entrance into public commerce.”



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