Opinion
Guest Voices



A note attached to a bundle of flowers left outside the Beth Israel Congregation reads, "I am so very sorry," on Jan. 12, 2026, in Jackson, Miss., after an arson attack significantly damaged the synagogue, the oldest in Mississippi. (AP/Sophie Bates)



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As the United States marks the 250th anniversary of its independence, old questions have returned about who belongs and whose religious practices are truly protected in the country.

At the start of the year, an arson attack significantly damaged the oldest synagogue in Mississippi. Two days later, local officials in Oklahoma rejected a proposal to build a mosque after opponents declared Islam "hostile to our Constitution." A Texas GOP congressman complained on social media that a Hindu festival was a "third world" practice. These incidents come amid resurgent claims that the United States is a Christian nation.

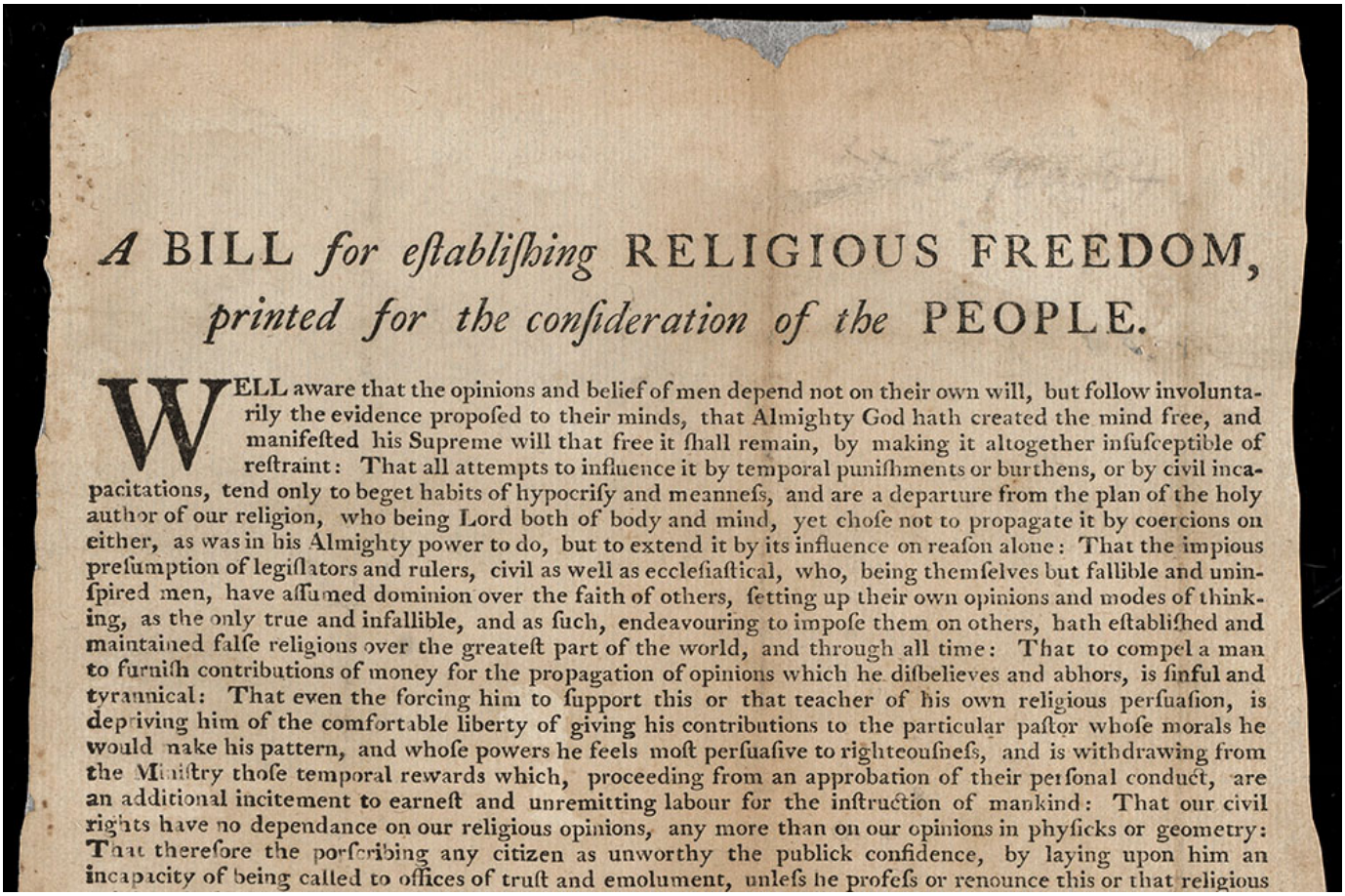
All this has happened even as President Donald Trump has emphasized a particular idea of religious liberty throughout his second term. In his proclamation for Religious Freedom Day in 2026, he emphasized familiar ideas of Americans' "God-given right to practice their faith, follow their conscience, and worship their God freely and without fear." But the statement also seemed to reflect a broader project of lending government support to Christianity. The proclamation linked support for religious liberty with projects to eliminate "anti-Christian bias."

The tension between embracing religious liberty and the marginalization of other religions in favor of Christianity is not new. As a historian of U.S. religion, I recognize that ideals of religious freedom have long coexisted with religious discrimination or outright bigotry. Importantly, however, history also offers a lesson for the present by

showing the important role U.S. Christians have played in combating such bigotry.

Religious freedom in theory

As the founders built a new nation, many emphasized the importance of religious liberty. Shortly after independence in 1776, Thomas Jefferson began drafting the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom. When enacted a decade later, the law declared that Virginians' "civil rights" did not depend on their "religious opinions." Civic participation was not limited to members of particular traditions, and there was no state-funded church. The law was a foundational step to prevent government from discriminating against citizens on the basis of their beliefs.



A BILL *for eſtabliſhing* RELIGIOUS FREEDOM,
printed for the conſideration of the PEOPLE.

WELL aware that the opinions and belief of men depend not on their own will, but follow involuntarily the evidence propoſed to their minds, that Almighty God hath created the mind free, and manifeſted his Supreme will that free it ſhall remain, by making it altogether inſuſceptible of reſtraint: That all attempts to influence it by temporal puniſhments or burthens, or by civil incapacitations, tend only to beget habits of hypocriſy and meanneſs, and are a departure from the plan of the holy author of our religion, who being Lord both of body and mind, yet choſe not to propagate it by coercions on either, as was in his Almighty power to do, but to extend it by its influence on reaſon alone: That the impious preſumption of legiſlators and rulers, civil as well as eccleſiaſtical, who, being themſelves but fallible and uninſpired men, have aſſumed dominion over the faith of others, ſetting up their own opinions and modes of thinking, as the only true and infallible, and as ſuch, endeavouring to impoſe them on others, hath eſtabliſhed and maintained falſe religions over the greateſt part of the world, and through all time: That to compel a man to furniſh contributions of money for the propagation of opinions which he diſbelieves and abhors, is ſinful and tyrannical: That even the forcing him to ſupport this or that teacher of his own religious perſuaſion, is depriving him of the comfortable liberty of giving his contributions to the particular paſtor whoſe morals he would make his pattern, and whoſe powers he feels moſt perſuaſive to righteouſneſs, and is withdrawing from the Miniſtry thoſe temporal rewards which, proceeding from an approbation of their perſonal conduct, are an additional incitement to earneſt and unremitting labour for the inſtruction of mankind: That our civil rights have no dependance on our religious opinions, any more than on our opinions in phyſicks or geometry: That therefore the proſcribing any citizen as unworthy the publick confidence, by laying upon him an incapacity of being called to offices of truſt and emolument, unleſs he profeſs or renounce this or that religious

Detail of "A bill for establishing religious freedom : printed for the consideration of the people," from the Virginia House of Delegates in 1779 (Digital Commonwealth)

The Virginia statute provided a template for the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, ratified in 1791. The amendment prohibits Congress from enacting laws that favor particular religions or interfering with free religious practice. It

represents a key safeguard for personal belief against the power of the federal government.

Legal safeguards did not mean that all religious groups were treated equally, however. In reality, many Americans imagined the new nation to be a Protestant country.

Official and unofficial religious discrimination

Despite protections at the federal level and in some states, including Virginia, state and local governments were not bound by First Amendment protections until the 1920s. Religious discrimination in civic life was commonplace for the nation's first 100 years.

North Carolina prohibited Catholics from holding public office until the 1830s and Jews from doing so until the 1860s. New Hampshire's Constitution banned all non-Protestants from holding public office until 1877.

Smaller instances of religious bigotry abounded as well. In some public schools, including in large cities such as Philadelphia, students of all religions were required to read the Bible and sing Protestant hymns. Jewish Americans were often forced to work on their Sabbath and found themselves barred from some hotels and resorts, especially in the second half of the 1800s.



"Riot in Philadelphia," an 1844 lithograph H. Bucholzer. Anti-Catholic nativists rioted that year when the city's growing Catholic population challenged the use of a Protestant Bible translation in public schools. (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division)

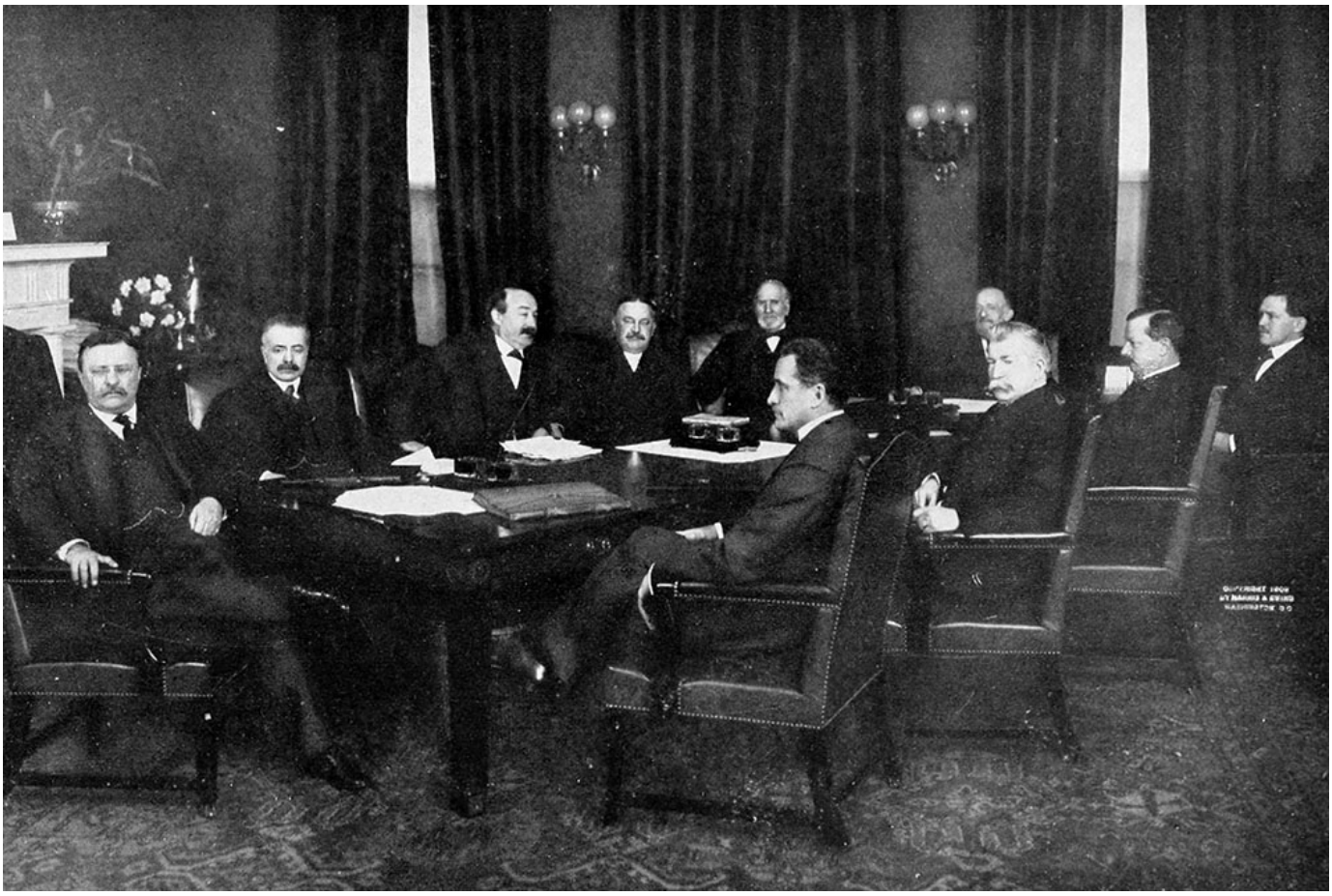
At times, hostility to religious minorities even fueled outright violence. The Philadelphia Bible Riots of 1844 began when the city's growing Catholic population challenged the use of a Protestant Bible translation in public schools. Anti-Catholic nativists responded with force, and the ensuing conflict left over a dozen people dead.

Toward a 'Judeo-Christian' America

Things slowly began to change soon after the nation's centennial in 1876. As I explore in my work, rising indifference toward religion among many Americans, as well as outright atheism, pushed many Protestant leaders to reevaluate how they treated their Catholic and Jewish neighbors.

Echoing a distrust of atheists that runs deep in U.S. history, these Protestants believed that any religion — even a non-Protestant one — was better for society

than no religion at all. This conclusion prompted many Protestants to more fully affirm Catholicism and Judaism. By the early 1900s, it had become common for Protestant ministers to challenge religious bigotry, as one Minnesota clergyman did when he publicly lamented the "false notions and wretched prejudices" held against Jews.



U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt, left, with his Cabinet in March 1909. Roosevelt boasted, "In my cabinet at present, there sit side by side Catholic and Protestant, Christian and Jew." (Wikimedia Commons)

This attitude gained support among the nation's leaders. President Theodore Roosevelt took a major step by publicly praising Catholics and Jews. He insisted that their religious affiliations did not keep them from being "full Americans."

After appointing the first Jewish Cabinet member in U.S. history, Roosevelt boasted, "In my cabinet at present, there sit side by side Catholic and Protestant, Christian and Jew."

There was soon a backlash to the growing acceptance of religious diversity. The 1920s witnessed the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan. Its anti-immigrant campaigns targeted Catholics and Jews with particular force.

Still, the idea that Jewish and Catholic Americans were equal stakeholders in American society took root. By the 1950s, politicians, academics and religious leaders described the United States not as a Protestant country but a "Judeo-Christian" one.

Expanding multiculturalism

The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 opened a new chapter for religious pluralism in the United States. The law ended restrictions on immigration from non-European countries. Consequently, the number of practitioners of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam increased significantly.

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Christian groups lobbied strongly for these changes. The National Council of Churches, which represented the country's major Protestant denominations, lent its significant clout to support the legislation. U.S. Catholic organizations likewise endorsed the 1965 law. For many Catholics, earlier experiences of discrimination and prejudice guided their desire for a more welcoming, inclusive immigration policy.

After 1965, religious diversity became far more visible to ordinary Americans. Earlier generations of immigrants — including Catholics and Jews in the 1800s — typically settled in ethnic enclaves. By contrast, immigrants now settled in diverse suburban communities. Newly arrived Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims often lived next door to Protestant, Catholic and Jewish families.

As in earlier periods, these developments were not entirely harmonious. The 1980s and '90s witnessed violent attacks against both the institutions and individual practitioners of minority religions. Islamic centers and Buddhist temples were targeted in places ranging from Massachusetts to Minnesota, to Tennessee. The large population of Hindu Americans in northern New Jersey endured a wave of violence against individuals. Despite these instances, scholar of religion Diana L. Eck

chronicled in her 2001 book *A New Religious America* how fully the religious nature of the U.S. had been transformed as the nation became characterized by multiculturalism.

While religious minorities have often faced exclusion and hostility, many Americans have long believed that guarantees of religious liberty promise a more inclusive society. In its 250th year, that promise is being tested once again.

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