

Celebrating 250 years of religious freedom

Guest column, [Brunswick Beacon](#), 07.02.26

On America's 250th birthday, we should all be proud. We began as 13 small colonies hugging a coast at the world's edge, ruled by the whims of a distant king. Today, we are the world's richest nation and third largest in size and population. Our military is the strongest in history. We lead in science and technology — Americans are the only people to walk on the moon.

We should also be proud of the religious freedom enshrined in our Constitution by the Founding Fathers. James Madison, considered the "Father of the Constitution," warned that, "Torrents of blood have been spilt in the old world, by vain attempts of the secular arm, to extinguish Religious discord, by proscribing all difference in Religious opinion."

To spare America that same fate, Article VI of the Constitution guaranteed that "no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States," and the First Amendment provided that, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

Ronald Reagan eloquently celebrated America's religious freedom when he stated, "We establish no religion in this country, nor will we ever. We command no worship. We mandate no belief. All are free to believe or not to believe; all are free to practice a faith or not."

Reagan embraced the sentiments of Thomas Jefferson's letter to the Danbury Baptist Association. Jefferson said the First Amendment built "a wall of separation between Church & State." He wrote, "religion is a matter which lies solely between Man & his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only, & not opinions."

Jefferson feared that religious zealots would attempt to impose their beliefs on others. In his letter to Dr. Benjamin Rush, a fellow signer of the Declaration of Independence, he wrote, "I promised you a letter on Christianity, which I have not forgotten." Jefferson observed that "every sect believes its own form the true one." Some members of the Christian clergy, he warned, hoped for the "establishment of a particular form of Christianity thro' the US." Soon to become our third president, Jefferson pledged that "any position of power confided to me will be exerted in opposition to their schemes" because "I have sworn upon the altar of god eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man."

Millions have seen those stirring words carved into the rotunda of the Jefferson Memorial. Few know that the tyranny Jefferson feared was zealots seeking to impose Christianity on other Americans.

Madison and Jefferson were not the only Founding Fathers hostile to such tyranny. The Treaty of Tripoli, guaranteeing American ships freedom from attack by the Barbary pirates, was negotiated by President Washington, approved unanimously by the Senate, and signed by President Adams. It states: “the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian Religion” and “has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion or tranquility of Muslims.”

Today, Jefferson’s warning is more urgent than ever — the wall of separation the Founding Fathers bequeathed us is under determined assault.

The Religious Liberty Commission President Trump created proclaims, “There is no separation of Church and State.”

Representative Lauren Boebert (R-CO) said, “I’m tired of this separation of Church and State junk. The Church is supposed to direct the government.”

If the Church directs the government, the crucial question becomes, “Whose Church?”

Speaker of the House Mike Johnson has his answer. First, he rejects the separation of Church and State because, he says, “the phrase derives not from the Constitution, but from a personal letter.” He turns Jefferson’s words inside-out, claiming, against all evidence, that “The Founders wanted to protect the Church from an encroaching State, not the other way around.”

Then, Johnson answers the crucial question by violating the Constitution’s prohibition against religious tests for public office and urging voters to tell candidates, “I want to know what you think about the Christian heritage of this country.”

Religious tests like Johnson would impose offend the Constitution’s guarantee of religious freedom and betray Reagan’s promise that “We establish no religion in this country, nor will we ever.”

Secular leaders are not alone in advocating the separation of government and religion. Leaders of different faiths understand the virtue of keeping Church and State apart.

Celebrating America's 200th birthday, Billy Graham wrote: "Whatever you may believe, no one can close your church because your religion does not coincide with his. A few people meeting in a small, out-of-the-way shack, worshiping God as they believe in Him, have the same right to religious freedom as the people who worship God in the great cathedrals on the avenues of our greatest cities."

In his powerful sermon, "A Knock at Midnight," Martin Luther King, Jr. proclaimed: "The Church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the State, but rather the conscience of the State. It must be the guide and the critic of the State, and never its tool."

The separation of Church and State is a nonpartisan virtue. Secular and religious leaders alike recognize that it has enabled liberty and religion to flourish together in America as nowhere else. We must resolve to guarantee future generations of Americans the same religious freedom we have enjoyed throughout our first 250 years so that, as Reagan said, "All are free to believe or not to believe; all are free to practice a faith or not."

Shelley Allen, Chair
Brunswick County Democratic Party