Attacks on minority religions in America are on the rise.

There have been several mosque burnings in recent months, and hundreds of tombstones have been vandalized in Jewish cemeteries in the last couple of weeks. More than a hundred synagogues have received bomb threats since the start of the year although, thankfully, there have been no bombs. These may be the acts of just a few individuals, but America’s religious communities have come out in force to support each other.

American believers of all stripes have mobilized to support targeted religions. Christians from a variety of denominations have organized and attended rallies for religious freedom, especially in support of the freedom to worship the divine as one sees fit. Catholics, Methodists, Lutherans and Baptists, along with Hindus, Muslims and Jews -- the list could go on -- have participated, and their leaders made speeches calling for acceptance of all religions.

The Rev. Cody Sanders wrote in this month’s Baptist News Global, “If we don’t act now in solidarity with our Muslim siblings, we’ve got no legitimate reason to claim we are followers of Jesus.”

Within this large umbrella of interfaith support of our country’s smaller religions is these religions’ support of each other. As their communities and institutions have been attacked, Jews and Muslims have been supporting each other and working together.

When a mosque was burned in Victoria, Texas, Jews opened their synagogue to the Muslims as a worship space. When another was burned in Tampa, Fla., local Jews contributed extensively to the fund for replacing it.

In both Philadelphia and St. Louis, where hundreds of Jewish tombstones were knocked over by vandals, Muslims organized to help the Jewish community restore the cemeteries. As bomb threats against Jewish community centers have increased, Muslim organizations have been quick to condemn such threatening actions, as have representatives of Christianity and other religions.

These supportive activities are not just one-off events, but parallel a growing movement within each religion here in the USA to participate in activities that improve understanding and friendship with each other. In some communities, Jews have attended Muslim Friday prayers while, in others, Muslims have attended synagogue services. Elsewhere, there have been “teach-ins,” where Jews and Muslims learn about each other’s religious beliefs and practices, seeking to understand the differences and identify aspects of their commonalities -- including important moments of shared history.

This is what the USA’s legal emphasis on religious freedom means. It means that our nation is one of the few places in the world where the country and its government provide members of all faiths (and no faith) the freedom to worship and believe as they see fit. It allows for interreligion cooperation and friendship. Rather than elevating one religion over another, the government allows room for all and for all to work together (or not) as they wish. While short-term political surges may temporarily privilege one religious movement, these are always tempered by our legal and constitutional foundation.

The steps American Muslims and Jews have taken toward cooperation are only beginning to take fruit, but they provide hope in light of the ongoing religious problems in the Middle East, especially the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. There, politics and political advantage have overshadowed religious discussion, cooperation and freedom.

In part, this is because in all countries involved, the government supports one religion over the other and, often, the religion becomes a weapon in each government’s arsenal. The arguments, violence and sometimes military conflict largely prevent the development of religious tolerance, understanding and cooperation, which could lead ultimately to peace.

Moreover, the cooperation of the two religions in the USA is reminiscent of Jewish-Muslim cooperation during Muhammad’s time. Jews were citizens of Medina when that town decided to invite Muhammad to govern them. And, although they did not convert to Islam as Muhammad hoped, Jews cooperated with his rule, and he remained respectful of them throughout his life. This should not be surprising since Islam believes in Judaism’s God.

It is only quite recently, in the upheavals of the 20th century that resulted in the establishment of the Jewish state of Israel, that Muslims of the Middle East came to hate Jews. Again, this has more to do with Israel’s occupying land formerly held by Muslims and still claimed by them than with religious differences.

In the end, although we should not read too much into recent cooperative and supportive activities between American Muslims and Jews, we should be proud that our country provides a place for such rapprochement. Perhaps members of the two religions will learn about each other in ways that might lead to positive developments elsewhere.

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