

READERS THEATER ON THE RELIGIOUS TEST CLAUSE

Kathryn Bartel
St. Mary's Springs Academy
Fond du Lac, Wisconsin

SCRIPT BASED ON:

[William Williams to the Printer, *American Mercury*, 11 February 1788](#)
[Elihu, *American Mercury*, 18 February 1788](#)

INTRODUCTION:

William Williams was the son of a minister and studied theology, in combination with law, at Harvard. His plans to join the ministry were waylaid when he became a member of the militia during the French and Indian War. Following a different path, after the war, he opened a store in Lebanon; The Williams Inc. Williams was a public servant who filled many roles throughout his lifetime. Notably he served as a town clerk, justice of the peace, a selectman, and a judge.

Williams was elected to replaced Oliver Wolcott as a member of the Continental Congress. Although he arrived after the Congress had voted to accept the Declaration of Independence, he was present to represent Connecticut as a signatory of the formal copy.

As a delegate of the Connecticut state constitutional convention, Williams voted to ratify although he was originally opposed to ratification. In 1787, his vote for ratification put Williams on a short list of delegates considered both Antifederalists and Federalists. Williams' wrote a letter to the paper *American Mercury* regarding his concerns about the religious test clause. As a result, a rebuttal from an anonymous writer was published leading to the following confrontation.

Elihu is a character in the Hebrew Bible's Book of Job. The book of Job is a story of suffering and Elihu is one of Job's friends who comes to comfort him in his distress. Elihu appears late in the biblical account and is the last to speak. Elihu, who after listening in a long silence to the arguments made by others, attempts to explain Job's trials and suffering. His thoughts were considered the definitive explanation of Job's suffering since there was no rebuttal.

ROLES IN SCRIPT:

Narrator
William Williams
Elihu

SCRIPT:

Setting: Following a town meeting the editor of the Boston American Mercury questioned Mr. Williams regarding the anonymous response to his letter printed in the paper.

Narrator: Today's discussion centers on the proposed Constitution and specifically a clause in it prohibiting the use of a religious test for office-holders. Today we have two individuals with us to discuss the issue. William Williams is with us and well as Elihu. Williams is generally supportive of the Constitution but as we will see, he has concerns about the clause that prohibits the use of religious tests for office-holders. Elihu also joins us. He is opposed to religious tests and as such is supportive of the Constitution. Welcome gentlemen.

William Williams: Thank-you. It's good to be here.

Elihu: Thanks for inviting me.

Narrator: Elihu, let's start with you. What exactly is your opinion on this issue?

Elihu: It has been reported that [this] honorable gentleman . . . has since expressed his discontent by an expression no less remarkable than this, "that [the framers of the Constitution] had not allowed God a seat there"!!

Narrator: And Mr. Williams, I presume this is a problem for you?

William Williams: When the clause in the 6th Article, which provides that "no religious test should ever be required as a qualification to any office or trust," I observed I should have chose that sentence . . . had been totally omitted rather than stand as it did; but still more wished something of the kind should have been inserted, but with a reverse sense so far as to require an explicit acknowledgment of the being of a God.

Narrator: So what might you have proposed instead?

William Williams: [Well, I suppose something like . . .] *We the people of the United States, in a firm belief of the being and perfections of the one living and true God, the creator and supreme Governor of the world, in His universal providence and the authority of His laws: that He will require of all moral agents an account of their conduct, that all rightful powers among men are ordained of, and mediately derived from God, therefore in a dependence on His blessing and acknowledgment of His efficient protection in establishing our Independence, whereby it is become necessary to agree upon and settle a Constitution of federal government for ourselves, and in order to form a more perfect union, etc, as it is expressed in the present introduction, do ordain, etc. And instead of none, that no other religious test should ever be required, etc.*

Narrator: So Elihu, I assume you have some problems with this?

Elihu: [Yes.] Should any body of men, whose characters were unknown to me, form a plan of government, and prologue it with a long pharisaical harangue about God and religion, I should suspect a design to cheat and circumvent us, and their cant, and semblance of superior sanctity would be the ground of my suspicion.

Narrator: So, you would suggest there is no need for any statement about religion?

Elihu: If they have a plan founded on good sense, wisdom, and experience, what occasion have they to make use of God, His providence, or religion, like old cunning monks to gain our assent to what is in itself rational and just?

Narrator: Would you go so far as to say these types of issues are unnecessary?

Elihu: [Do we really believe] there must be . . . some proof, some evidence that we the people acknowledge the being of a God. Is this a thing that wants proof? Is this a thing that wants constitutional establishment in the United States?

Narrator: So it follows that you think a religious oath would have little or no effect on those who do not believe in a God to begin with?

Elihu: [Exactly.] It is a matter of faith . . . we are not to bind the consciences of men by laws or constitutions. The mind is free; it may be convinced by reasoning, but cannot be compelled by laws *or constitutions*, no, nor by fire, faggot, or the halter. Such an acknowledgment is moreover useless *as a religious test*.

Narrator: It seems you have suspicions about any religious test being used.

Elihu: [Yes. They are] calculated to exclude from office *fools* only, who believe there is no God; and the people of America are now become so enlightened that no fool hereafter (it is hoped) will ever be promoted to any office or high station.

Narrator: Mr. Williams, what is your response to this notion that to force an oath on an unbeliever would be either hypocritical or ineffective?

William Williams: I freely confess such a test and acknowledgment would have given me great additional satisfaction.

Narrator: It would be some sort of insurance policy in your mind?

William Williams: [Yes.]

Narrator: But on this issue of hypocrisy that Elihu has raised, how do you respond to this argument that unbelievers are not concerned about being hypocritical in swearing an oath to God?

William Williams: On the score of hypocrisy, would apply with equal force against requiring an[y] oath from any officer of the united or individual states, and, with little abatement, to any oath in any case whatever. . . . [Just because it] would make hypocrites . . . [is] not be a sufficient reason against it.

Narrator: Why is that?

William Williams: It would be a public declaration against, and disapprobation of, men who did not, even with sincerity, make such a profession, and they must be left to the Searcher of Hearts; that it would be the voice of the great body of the people.

Narrator: And this is important why?

William Williams: [It would be] an acknowledgment proper and highly becoming them to express on this great and only occasion, and, according to the course of Providence, one means of obtaining blessings from the Most High.

Elihu: The time has been when nations could be kept in awe with stories of gods sitting with legislators and dictating laws; with this lure, cunning politicians have established their own power on the credulity of the people, shackling their uninformed minds with incredible tales.

William Williams: But divine and human wisdom, with universal experience, have approved and established them as useful and a security to mankind.

Narrator: Elihu, would you concede that it is important for nations to acknowledge the divine to some degree? It is true that throughout history oaths have been required of government officials.

Elihu: But the light of philosophy has arisen in these latter days, miracles have ceased, oracles are silenced, monkish darkness is dissipated, and even witches at last hide their heads. Mankind are no longer to be deluded with fable. Making the glory of God subservient to the temporal interest of men is a wornout trick, and a pretense to superior sanctity and special grace will not much longer promote weakness over the head of wisdom.

William Williams: I thought it was my duty to make the observations in this behalf, which I did, and to bear my testimony for God.

Narrator: Let's conclude with a closing statement from each of our guests.

Elihu: [To] imagine that God, like a foolish old man, will think himself slighted and dishonored if he is not complimented with a seat or a prologue of recognition in the Constitution, but those great philosophers who formed the Constitution had a higher idea of the perfection of that INFINITE MIND which governs all worlds than to suppose they could add to his honor or glory, or that He would be pleased with such low familiarity or vulgar flattery.

William Williams: *The Constitution*, with this and some other faults . . . was yet too wise and too necessary to be rejected [outright.] These are . . . ideas and sentiments I endeavored to communicate on that subject . . . and whether there is any reason in them or not, I submit to the public.