

New Hampshire Spy, 23 February 1788¹

(As the following was committed to paper without taking notes at the time, and barely from memory, the Editor must beg pardon of those gentlemen whose arguments are weakened, or stile debased, by an attempt to gratify the public.)

... Among other paragraphs which were debated, none took up more time in the convention, than the article which says, “The senators and representatives before mentioned, and the members of the several state legislatures, and all executive and judicial officers, both of the United States and of the several states, shall be bound by oath or affirmation, to support this constitution; but no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States,” *Art. 6. Sec. 4.*

This paragraph being read, Deacon [Matthias] *Stone*,² (from Claremont) rose, and wished to know whether a religious test was not necessary for the security of our religious rights—he thought it was—it had ever been practised by our forefathers—and was considered by them as their inestimable privilege—their pearl of great price—He called upon the reverend Clergy and the friends to religion to rise and support the cause of religion:—he tho’t, in the present day, when iniquity was abounding, it was highly necessary that there should be some restraint laid upon wicked and designing men. He thought it was necessary, at least, that men, previous to their entering into any office of state, should acknowledge their belief in the being of a God, &c. He did not know but, if this constitution was adopted, that Congress might deprive the people of the use of the holy scriptures—that *pearl of great price* —that *inestimable jewel*³ —he said, he was not for confining men’s consciences, but he tho’t, as we were now establishing new government, it was the only time to secure our religious rights, or it might hereafter be too late. He said, he did not, for his part consider the connecting the civil power with the ecclesiastical in so novel a manner as the Rev. Gentlemen present.—The scriptures hold up the idea—“*Kings shall be their nursing fathers, and Queens their nursing mothers* [’]”⁴—where then was the harm—he believed the Rev. Gentlemen present, had often received their salary in consequence of this support, and would be glad to receive it again in the same way.

He was answered by the Rev. Dr. *Langdon*,⁵ who took a general view of religion as unconnected with and detached from civil power—that it was an obligation between God and his

creatures, and the civil authority could not interfere without infringing upon the rights of conscience. He said, the paragraph as it stood, was the greatest security that could be expected. He took a short review of the christian history, and with admirable ingenuity traced the various steps by which the civil power became connected with the ecclesiastical, and by which the ecclesiastical became the supreme head, dispensing laws to kings and emperors, dictating their councils, &c. He said, this connecting the civil power with the ecclesiastical was the cause of all the persecutions which had taken place. Religion must stand upon its own ground—if it could not, he should never think of calling upon the civil arm for its support— It would be arguing that its great author was insufficient. He said our state constitution guarantied to us the free exercise of our religion,⁶ of which the new constitution was no infringement—that he should not have objected, if a paragraph had been inserted agreeable to the gentlemen’s wishes, but had rather it should be omitted, because it would be acknowledging a power which he did not think the government ought to possess, that of dictating in matters of conscience. He venerated the concern which the gentlemen expressed for the cause of religion, but thought the zeal a mistaken one.—He was fully sensible of the importance of having religious men for our rulers, honest men, men hating covetousness—but, says he, where shall we draw the line? Religion does not consist in outward appearances; a man may make fair pretensions, and yet be a hypocrite at heart. A test will never be binding upon an atheist, a man of no religion. He reprobated the idea of the roman catholic religion gaining ground in this land; “the kings of the earth, said he, who formerly united in building up the kingdom of that whore, are now busily employed in pulling her down; and the period is not far distant, when she will sink like a mighty millstone, never to rise again.” He was decidedly in favour of the paragraph as it stood, and considered it as one of the greatest ornaments to the new Constitution.

1. Reprinted: *Massachusetts Gazette*, 29 February, 4 March; *Boston American Herald*, 3 March; *Exeter Freeman’s Oracle*, 7, 14 March; and *New Hampshire Recorder*, 25 March (last four paragraphs). See also note 8 (below).

2. Matthias Stone, a farmer, served in the militia during the Revolutionary War. Stone voted not to ratify the Constitution in June 1788.

3. Matthew 13:45–46. “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant man, seeking goodly pearls: Who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had, and bought it.”

4. Isaiah 49:23.

5. A similar but shorter account of Langdon's speech was printed in the Massachusetts *Salem Mercury*, 4 March 1788. The account was reprinted eleven times by 12 April: Vt. (1), Conn. (2), N.J. (1), Pa. (5), Md. (1), Va. (1). The reprinting in the *Maryland Journal*, 21 March, was followed by this paragraph: "The Error seems not sufficiently eradicated (says Mr. *Jefferson*, in his Notes on Virginia) that the Operations of the Mind, as well as the Acts of the Body, are subject to the Coercion of the Laws. But our Rulers can have Authority over such natural Rights only, as we have submitted to them. The Rights of Conscience we never submitted—We could not submit. We are answerable for them to our God. The legitimate Powers of Government extend to such Acts only, as are injurious to others. But it does me no Injury for my Neighbour to say, that there are Twenty Gods, or no God—it neither picks my Pocket, or breaks my Leg."

6. See Article 5 of the 1784 New Hampshire Bill of Rights

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