



CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE AMERICAN CONSTITUTION

csac.history.wisc.edu > Document Collections > Religion and Ratification > The Debate
Over Religious Tests > The Landholder/Williams Debate

Elihu

Hartford, Conn., *American Mercury*, 18 February 1788

I was afraid, and durst not shew mine opinion. I said days should speak and multitude of years should teach wisdom. Great men are not always wise, neither doth age understand judgment. I will answer. I also will shew mine opinion. The Spirit within me constraineth me. I will speak that I may be refreshed. Let me not accept any man's person, neither let me give flattering titles unto man. etc. Job, chap. XXXII.

It was an objection against the Constitution, urged in the late Convention, that the being of a God was not explicitly acknowledged in it. It has been reported that an honorable gentleman, who gave his vote in favor of the Constitution, has since expressed his discontent by an expression no less remarkable than this, “that they (speaking of the framers of the Constitution) had not allowed God a seat there”!!

Another honorable gentleman who gave his vote in like manner, has published a *specimen of an introductory acknowledgment of a God* such as should have been in his opinion prefixed to the Constitution, viz.: *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*—This introduction is likewise to serve as a religious test, for he says “*instead of none, no other religious test should ever be required, etc.*”

In treating of a *being* who is above comprehension there may be a certain degree of propriety in using language that is so; if any reader's brain is too weak to obtain a distinct idea of a writer's meaning, I am sensible it may be retorted that a writer is not obliged to furnish his readers with comprehension. Neither is there any law to oblige him to write comprehensible matter, which is a great comfort to me; as I shall not stop to think, but proceed to give mine opinion! 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. 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? “There must be (tis objected) 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? It is almost the only thing that all universally are agreed in; everybody believes there is a God; not a man of common sense in the United States denies or disbelieves it. *The fool hath said in his heart there is no God*, but was there ever a wise man said such a thing? No, not in any age or in any country. Besides, if it was not so, if there were unbelievers, as it is a matter of faith, it might as well be admitted; for 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—it is 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.

An honorable gentleman objects that God has no seat allowed him. Is this only to find fault with the Constitution because he had no hand in making it? Or is he serious? Would he have given God a seat there? For what purpose? To get a name for sanctity that he might have it in his power to impose on the people? 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. 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.

A low mind may 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.

The most shining part, the most brilliant circumstance in honor of the framers of the Constitution is their avoiding all appearance of craft, declining to dazzle even the superstitious by a hint about grace or ghostly knowledge. They come to us in the plain language of common sense and propose to our understanding a system of government as the invention of mere human wisdom; no deity comes down to dictate it, not even a God appears in a dream to propose any part of it.

A knowledge of human nature, the aid of philosophy, and the experience of ages are seen in the very face of it; whilst it stands forth like a magnificent STATUE of gold. Yet, there are not wanting FANATICS who would crown it with the periwig of an old monk and wrap it up in a black cloak—whilst *political quackery* is contending to secure it with fetters and decorate it with a leather apron!!

CITE AS: John P. Kaminski et al., eds., *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution*, Vol. III: Delaware, New Jersey, Georgia, and Connecticut (Madison, Wis.: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 1978), 590–92.