

Module 03: A Revolution for Whom?

Evidence 24: Massachusetts Debates the Federal Constitution, January 30, 1788

A

Introduction

The only reference to religion in the United States Constitution appears in Article 6, which states that "no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States." Like all other parts of the Constitution, the clause above was the subject of fierce debate during the ratification process. In the Massachusetts ratifying convention, for example, it sparked this exchange between Charles Jarvis and Daniel Shute.

Questions to Consider

- What were Jarvis's concerns about Article 6?
- What impact did Shute fear a religious test would have on individual Americans?
- What impact did Shute think a religious test would have on the United States government?
- Why did Shute think such a test would fail to serve any useful purpose?

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[Dr. Jarvis.] In the conversation on Thursday, on the sixth article, which provides that "no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office," &c., several gentlemen urged that it was a departure from the principles of our forefathers, who came here for the preservation of their religion; and that it would admit deists, atheists, &c., into the general government; and, people being apt to imitate the examples of the court, these principles would be disseminated, and, of course, a corruption of morals ensue. Gentlemen on the other side applauded the liberality of the clause, and represented, in striking colors, the impropriety, and almost impiety, of the requisition of a test, as practised in Great Britain and elsewhere. In this conversation, the following is the substance of the

observations of the

Rev. Mr. Shute. Mr. President, to object to the latter part of the paragraph under consideration, which excludes a religious test, is, I am sensible, very popular; for the most of men, somehow, are rigidly tenacious of their own sentiments in religion, and disposed to impose them upon others as the *standard* of truth. If, in my sentiments upon the point in view, I should differ from some in this honorable body, I only wish from them the exercise of that candor, with which true religion is adapted to inspire the honest and well-disposed mind.

To establish a religious test as a qualification for offices in the proposed federal Constitution, it appears to me, sir, would be attended with injurious consequences to some individuals, and with no advantage to the *whole*.

By the injurious consequences to individuals, I mean, that some, who, in every other respect, are qualified to fill some important post in government, will be excluded by their not being able to stand the religious test; which I take to be a privation of part of their civil rights.

Nor is there to me any conceivable advantage, sir, that would result to the whole from such a test. Unprincipled and dishonest men will not hesitate to subscribe to *any thing* that may open the way for their advancement, and put them into a situation the better to execute their base and iniquitous designs. Honest men alone, therefore, however well qualified to serve the public, would be excluded by it, and their country be deprived of the benefit of their abilities.

In this great and extensive empire, there is, and will be, a great variety of sentiments in religion among its inhabitants. Upon the plan of a religious test, the question, I think, must be, Who shall be excluded from national trusts? Whatever answer bigotry may suggest, the dictates of candor and equity, I conceive, will be, *None*.

Far from limiting my charity and confidence to men of my own denomination in religion, I suppose, and I believe, sir, that there are worthy characters among men of every denomination--among the Quakers, the Baptists, the Church of England, the Papists; and even among those who have no other guide, in the way to virtue and heaven, than the dictates of

natural religion.

I must therefore think, sir, that the proposed plan of government, in this particular, is wisely constructed; that, as all have an equal claim to the blessings of the government under which they live, and which they support, so none should be excluded from them for being of any particular denomination in religion.

The presumption is, that the eyes of the people will be upon the faithful in the land; and, from a regard to their own safety, they will choose for their rulers men of known abilities, of known probity, of good moral characters. The apostle Peter tells us that God is no respecter of persons, but, in every nation, he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is *acceptable* to him. And I know of no reason why men of such a character, in a community of whatever denomination in religion, *caeteris paribus*, with other suitable qualifications, should not be *acceptable* to the people, and why they may not be employed by them with safety and advantage in the important offices of government. The exclusion of a religious test in the proposed Constitution, therefore, clearly appears to me, sir, to be in favor of its adoption.

Source:

Jonathan Elliot, ed., *The Debates in the Several State Conventions on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution as Recommended by the General Convention at Philadelphia in 1787*. . . , 5 vols. (2d ed., 1888). Downloaded from *The Founders' Constitution*, vol. 4, article 6, clause 3, doc. 20. http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/a6_3s20.html.