

Religious Tests and Oaths in State Constitutions in the Revolutionary Period, 1776-1784

Eleven out of thirteen states had some sort of religious test requirement for officeholders. At the time, many believed religious oaths were supposed to guarantee honorable public service for fear of incurring the wrath of God. Public officials who violated their oaths might escape punishment here on earth but could not avoid punishment in the hereafter.

In Article VI among provisions that addressed matters of oaths and allegiance, there was a clause that stipulated that “no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public trust under the United States.” For many Americans it was difficult to imagine how, under the proposed Constitution, leaders could be civically virtuous without such an oath being requisite to public service. These selections from state constitutions during the Revolutionary Period illustrate the historical background that influenced much of the debate during ratification over the Constitution’s prohibition of a religious test oath.

Delaware, 1776

Every person who shall be chosen a member of either house, or appointed to any office or place of trust, before taking his seat, or entering upon the execution of his office, shall take the following oath, or affirmation, if conscientiously scrupulous of taking an oath, to wit: “I, do profess faith in God the Father, and in Jesus Christ His only Son, and in the Holy Ghost, one God, blessed for evermore; and I do acknowledge the holy scriptures of the Old and New Testament to be given by divine inspiration.”

Maryland, 1776

That no other test or qualification ought to be required, on admission to any office of trust or profit, than such oath of support and fidelity to this State, and such oath of office, as shall be directed by this Convention or the Legislature of this State, and a declaration of a belief in the Christian religion.

New Jersey, 1776

No Protestant inhabitant of this Colony shall be denied the enjoyment of any civil right, merely on account of his religious principles; but that all persons, professing a belief in the faith of any Protestant sect. who shall demean themselves peaceably under the government, as hereby established, shall be capable of being elected into any office of profit or trust, or being a member of either branch of the Legislature. . . .

Pennsylvania, 1776

I do believe in one God, the creator and governor of the universe, the rewarder of the good and the punisher of the wicked. And I do acknowledge the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament to be given by Divine inspiration.

North Carolina, 1776

That no clergyman, or preacher of the gospels of any denomination, shall be capable of being a member of either the Senate, House of Commons, or Council of State, while he continues in the exercise of the pastoral function.

That no person, who shall deny the being of God or the truth of the Protestant religion, or the divine authority either of the Old or New Testaments, or who shall hold religious principles incompatible with the freedom and safety of the State, shall be capable of holding any office or place of trust or profit in the civil department within this State.

Virginia, 1776

And all ministers of the gospel, of every denomination, be incapable of being elected members of either House of Assembly or the Privy Council.

Georgia, 1777

The representatives shall be . . . of the Protestant religion. . . .

Vermont, 1777

And each member, before he takes his seat, shall make and subscribe the following declaration, " I ____ do believe in one God, the Creator and Governor of the Diverse, the rewarder of the good and punisher of the wicked. And I do acknowledge the scriptures of the old and new testament to be given by divine inspiration, and own and profess the protestant religion."

South Carolina, 1778

And whereas the ministers of the gospel are by their profession dedicated to the service of God and the cure of souls, and ought not to be diverted from the great duties of their function, therefore no minister of the gospel or public preacher of any religious persuasion, while he continues in the exercise of his pastoral function, and for two years after, shall be eligible either as governor, lieutenant-governor, a member of the senate, house of representatives, or privy council in this State.

Massachusetts, 1780

Any person chosen governor, lieutenant-governor, councillor, senator, or representative, and accepting the trust, shall, before he proceed to execute the duties

of his place or office, make and subscribe the following declaration: "I . . . do declare that I believe the Christian religion, and have a firm persuasion of its truth; and that I am seized and possessed, in my own right, of the property required by the constitution, as one qualification for the office or place to which I am elected."

New Hampshire, 1784

Every member of the house of representatives shall be of the Protestant religion. . . . That no person shall be capable of being elected a senator who is not of the Protestant religion. . . . The President shall be chosen annually; and no person shall be eligible to this office, unless at the time of his election, he . . . shall be of the protestant religion.