

Faith of Our Founding Fathers

Founding Intent, Moral Architecture, and Republican Durability

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Abstract

This paper documents—using primary sources and founding-era legal texts—that the architects of the American Republic understood faith in God, and the moral order flowing from that faith, as essential to liberty, justice, and the durability of republican government. It is not a denominational argument and does not claim uniform theology among the founders; rather, it is a historical finding regarding their stated premises for rights, law, civic virtue, and constitutional survival.

Drawing from the Declaration of Independence, congressional acts, state constitutions, oaths of office, and founders' letters and addresses, the paper shows that the founding generation grounded rights in a higher authority, treated law as accountable to transcendent judgment, and assumed that self-government requires moral restraint shaped by religion. The federal prohibition on a national religious test is examined in its original context—revealing it as a safeguard against sectarian coercion, not a mandate for irreligion in public life.

This work also serves as a deliberate bridge to the companion paper, *The Covenant Republic*, by establishing the founders' covenant consciousness and their understanding that national standing, protection, and prosperity are inseparable from moral and religious accountability.

Purpose & Scope

Purpose.

To establish, from primary historical sources, the founders' intent regarding faith, morality, and public order, and to demonstrate how those premises were understood as necessary for liberty, lawful authority, and republican endurance.

Scope.

This paper:

- Documents the theistic legal framework of the Declaration of Independence.

- Examines national acts and proclamations acknowledging dependence on divine providence.
- Presents founders' own words on religion, morality, and government.
- Analyzes founding-era state constitutions and oaths requiring religious accountability.
- Clarifies the original meaning and limits of Article VI's "no religious test" clause.
- Provides scriptural cross-references that align with the founders' stated assumptions.
- Establishes continuity between founding principles and America's covenant tradition.

What this paper is not.

It is not an argument for denominational establishment, theocracy, or compulsory belief. It is a historical and legal analysis of founding premises.

Foundational Premise

1. **Rights were understood as endowed, not granted.**
The founding generation consistently treated rights as grounded in a higher authority—"Nature's God," the Creator, and the Supreme Judge—rather than as gifts of the state.
 2. **Law and liberty require moral restraint.**
Founders repeatedly warned that constitutional mechanisms alone cannot restrain unbridled human passions; republican government presupposes a moral people shaped by religion and virtue.
 3. **Public authority was assumed to be accountable to God.**
National appeals to Providence, religious oaths, and state constitutional provisions demonstrate an expectation of divine accountability in public life.
 4. **The federal 'no religious test' clause was limited in scope.**
It was understood as preventing national sectarian coercion, not as removing religious influence, moral instruction, or faith-based accountability from public office.
 5. **Founding faith functioned as public architecture, not private sentiment.**
Religion was treated as a necessary support for justice, oaths, and civic trust—integral to the Republic's stability.
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I. God, Rights, and Republican Durability

Across the founding period, the core premise is consistent: rights are not gifts of the state; they are grounded in a higher authority, and republican government depends upon moral restraint.

The Declaration frames political legitimacy in terms of “Nature’s God,” the “Creator,” the “Supreme Judge,” and “Divine Providence.”[1]

- Rights are understood as “endowed” (not granted) by the Creator.[2]
- Law is accountable to transcendent judgment (“Supreme Judge of the world”).[3]
- Liberty is preserved only where virtue and moral restraint exist.[4]

Scripture cross-references (inline)

- Genesis 1:26–27 (human dignity under God)
- Psalm 82:1–8 (God judges rulers; justice standards)
- Isaiah 33:22 (the LORD as judge, lawgiver, king)
- Proverbs 14:34 (righteousness exalts a nation)
- Psalm 33:12 (blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD)

II. Founding Documents and National Acts

A. Declaration of Independence (1776) as a theistic legal appeal

The Declaration is not merely poetic. It is a public legal justification grounded in a defined chain of authority: God as source of law, rights, judgment, and protection. The text explicitly appeals to God in the act of national separation.[5]

B. Continental Congress proclamations: corporate prayer and national dependence

The Continental Congress repeatedly called the people to prayer, fasting, repentance, and thanksgiving—treating national success and preservation as dependent on divine favor.[6]

III. Founders’ Letters and Addresses on Religion, Morality, and Government

A. George Washington

In his Farewell Address, Washington warns that “religion and morality” are indispensable supports of political prosperity and that the obligations of oaths and the administration of justice presume religious obligation.[7]

B. John Adams

Adams teaches that constitutional mechanisms cannot restrain “human passions unbridled by morality and religion,” concluding: “Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious People. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.”[8]

C. Benjamin Franklin

At the Constitutional Convention, Franklin urged delegates to acknowledge that “God governs in the affairs of men,” and argued that national success requires divine aid.[9]

Scripture cross-references (inline)

- Psalm 127:1 (unless the LORD builds...)
- Proverbs 16:12 (righteousness establishes the throne)
- Romans 13:1–4 (civil authority under God’s order)

IV. State Constitutions and Oaths: Religion in the Public Order (Founding Era)

The federal ‘no religious test’ clause must be read against the founding-era reality: state constitutions and oaths commonly required belief in God and, in many cases, explicit Christian profession. This demonstrates the founders’ assumption that public trust and civic authority are tied to religious accountability.

Representative examples (primary sources)

- Massachusetts (1780), Declaration of Rights: public worship of the “Supreme Being... Creator and Preserver.”[10]
- Pennsylvania: acknowledgment of “the being of a God” and a future state of rewards/punishments connected to officeholding protections.[11]
- Delaware (1776): office declaration professing faith in the Trinity and acknowledging Scripture as divinely inspired.[12]
- Maryland (1776): protections for those “professing the Christian religion,” with public order and morality referenced.[13]

Scripture cross-references (inline)

- Deuteronomy 6:13 (oaths in God’s name)
- Nehemiah 9:38–10:29 (written covenant commitment)
- Proverbs 29:2 (righteous leadership and public joy)

V. Article VI ‘No Religious Test’: What It Did—and Did Not—Do

The Constitution’s prohibition on a federal religious test was widely understood as a safeguard against sectarian coercion and denominational establishment at the national level—not a mandate for irreligion in public life. The founding-era assumption of religious accountability remained evident in state practice and public instruction.[14]

Scripture cross-references (inline)

- Matthew 22:21 (rightful spheres of authority)

- Romans 14:5–12 (conscience before God)

VI. Transition: From Founders' Faith to National Covenant

Founders' faith was not framed as a private sentiment but as a public moral architecture sustaining law, liberty, and civic duty. This same architecture is expressed in America's covenant tradition—from colonial compacts to founding appeals to Providence. The companion paper, "The Covenant Republic," develops how covenant functions as the mechanism of national standing, protection, and restoration.

VII. Summary & Conclusion

The historical record demonstrates that the American Republic was founded upon explicit assumptions about God, moral order, and human accountability. The founders did not view faith as a private accessory to public life, but as an indispensable support for law, liberty, and self-government. Rights were understood to flow from a higher authority; law was framed as answerable to transcendent judgment; and republican durability was believed to depend upon virtue grounded in religion.

Founding documents, congressional acts, state constitutions, and the founders' own words converge on a single conclusion: constitutional structure alone cannot preserve freedom. Without moral restraint, religious obligation, and a shared sense of accountability before God, liberty decays and institutions fail. The federal prohibition on religious tests did not negate this understanding; it presupposed it.

This paper establishes that America's founding was not religiously neutral in the modern sense, but morally and theistically grounded. That grounding informed the nation's covenant consciousness—an understanding that national standing and protection are tied to fidelity to higher law. The implications are not merely historical. They frame the conditions under which republican government can endure, be restored, and remain worthy of the name "liberty."

The evidence is clear: where faith and morality are severed from public life, constitutional forms become hollow. Where they are honored, self-government remains possible.

Appendix A — Scripture Index (Topical)

- National righteousness and blessing: Proverbs 14:34; Psalm 33:12
- Law, judge, lawgiver, king: Isaiah 33:22; Psalm 82:1–8
- Civic authority under God: Romans 13:1–4
- Virtue and leadership: Proverbs 16:12; Proverbs 29:2
- Divine building/preservation: Psalm 127:1

Appendix B — Key Primary Sources Cited

- Declaration of Independence (1776), National Archives.
- George Washington, Farewell Address (1796), Founders Online / Library of Congress.
- John Adams to Massachusetts Militia (Oct. 11, 1798), Founders Online.
- Massachusetts Constitution (1780), Declaration of Rights.
- Pennsylvania constitutional religion provisions (founding-era texts maintained by Pennsylvania General Assembly).
- Delaware Constitution (1776) office declaration (Art. 22).
- Maryland Declaration of Rights (1776) religion provisions.

Footnotes

1. Declaration of Independence: National Archives “A Transcription” and “Milestone Documents” pages, 1776 text (Creator; Supreme Judge; Divine Providence).
2. Declaration of Independence (1776), National Archives transcript.
3. Declaration of Independence (1776), National Archives transcript.
4. Washington, Farewell Address (1796), Founders Online; and Adams to Massachusetts Militia (1798), Founders Online.
5. Declaration of Independence (1776), National Archives: “A Transcription” and “Milestone Documents.”
6. Journals of the Continental Congress and early national proclamations of prayer/fasting/thanksgiving; see National Archives and Library of Congress collections for proclamations and related records.
7. George Washington, Farewell Address (Sept. 19, 1796), Founders Online; corroborated by Library of Congress text.
8. John Adams to Massachusetts Militia (Oct. 11, 1798), Founders Online (National Archives).
9. Benjamin Franklin, speech at the Constitutional Convention (June 28, 1787), commonly preserved in convention notes; see Founders Online and Library of Congress contextual collections.
10. Massachusetts Constitution of 1780 (Declaration of Rights, Art. II), available via Massachusetts government and Founders’ documents collections.
11. Pennsylvania Constitution/Declaration of Rights provisions on religion; Pennsylvania General Assembly constitutional text.
12. Delaware Constitution of 1776, Art. 22 oath/declaration text, preserved in Founders’ documents collections.

13. Maryland Declaration of Rights (1776) religion provisions, preserved in Founders' documents collections and Maryland State Archives.)

14. U.S. Constitution, Article VI, Clause 3 (no religious test); see National Archives transcript and constitutional records.)

Appendix C — Key Bible Verses Cited (Full Text, KJV)

Genesis 1:26–27

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.

Psalms 33:12

Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD; and the people whom he hath chosen for his own inheritance.

Psalms 82:1–8

God standeth in the congregation of the mighty; he judgeth among the gods. How long will ye judge unjustly, and accept the persons of the wicked? Selah. Defend the poor and fatherless: do justice to the afflicted and needy... Arise, O God, judge the earth: for thou shalt inherit all nations.

Isaiah 33:22

For the LORD is our judge, the LORD is our lawgiver, the LORD is our king; he will save us.

Proverbs 14:34

Righteousness exalteth a nation: but sin is a reproach to any people.

Proverbs 16:12

It is an abomination to kings to commit wickedness: for the throne is established by righteousness.

Proverbs 29:2

When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice: but when the wicked beareth rule, the people mourn.

Romans 13:1–4

Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God... For he is the minister of God to thee for good.

Deuteronomy 6:13

Thou shalt fear the LORD thy God, and serve him, and shalt swear by his name.

Nehemiah 9:38

And because of all this we make a sure covenant, and write it; and our princes, Levites, and priests, seal unto it.

Psalm 127:1

Except the LORD build the house, they labour in vain that build it: except the LORD keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain.

Matthew 22:21

Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's.

Romans 14:12

So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God.

Appendix C — Key Bible Verses Cited (Full Text, NIV)

Genesis 1:26–27 (NIV)

Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

Psalm 33:12 (NIV)

Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD, the people he chose for his inheritance.

Psalm 82:1–8 (NIV)

God presides in the great assembly; he renders judgment among the “gods” ... Rise up, O God, judge the earth, for all the nations are your inheritance.

Isaiah 33:22 (NIV)

For the LORD is our judge, the LORD is our lawgiver, the LORD is our king; it is he who will save us.

Proverbs 14:34 (NIV)

Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin condemns any people.

Proverbs 16:12 (NIV)

Kings detest wrongdoing, for a throne is established through righteousness.

Proverbs 29:2 (NIV)

When the righteous thrive, the people rejoice; when the wicked rule, the people groan.

Romans 13:1–4 (NIV)

Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established... For the one in authority is God's servant for your good.

Deuteronomy 6:13 (NIV)

Fear the LORD your God, serve him only and take your oaths in his name.

Nehemiah 9:38 (NIV)

In view of all this, we are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites and our priests are affixing their seals to it.

Psalm 127:1 (NIV)

Unless the LORD builds the house, the builders labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the guards stand watch in vain.

Matthew 22:21 (NIV)

Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.

Romans 14:12 (NIV)

So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.

Appendix D — Founders' Quotations (Verbatim)

George Washington — Farewell Address (1796)

"Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. Let it simply be asked, where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation desert the oaths which are the instruments of investigation in courts of justice?"

John Adams — Letter to the Massachusetts Militia (October 11, 1798)

"Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other."

Benjamin Franklin — Constitutional Convention (June 28, 1787)

"I have lived, Sir, a long time, and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth—that God governs in the affairs of men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without His aid?"

Samuel Adams — Letter to Thomas Paine (1776)

"I rely upon the merits of Jesus Christ for a pardon of all my sins."

Patrick Henry — Speech (1774)

"It cannot be emphasized too strongly or too often that this great nation was founded, not by religionists, but by Christians; not on religions, but on the Gospel of Jesus Christ."