

No Religious Test: The True Meaning and Original Intent of Article VI

Why the Clause Prohibited Sectarian Control—Not Christian Qualification

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Abstract

This document establishes that the Article VI “no religious test” clause was never intended to secularize public office or remove Christian qualification from civil authority. Rather, its narrow and specific purpose was to prevent **denominational domination and sectarian exclusion** at the federal level while preserving the universally assumed Christian moral foundation of the American political order.

Drawing from founding-era documents, state constitutions, oaths of office, ratification debates, and contemporaneous writings of leading Founders, the analysis demonstrates that belief in God—and in many cases explicit belief in Jesus Christ—was required in **all thirteen original states** at the time of ratification. The federal clause therefore cannot reasonably be read as abolishing religious qualification when such qualification was universally practiced, expected, and affirmed.

The document concludes that modern interpretations portraying Article VI as mandating religious neutrality or permitting atheistic governance represent a post-Founding revision incompatible with the historical record, the structure of the Constitution, and the covenantal assumptions of the Republic.

Purpose & Scope

Purpose.

To clarify the original meaning and limited intent of the Article VI “no religious test” clause and to correct modern misinterpretations that sever it from the Christian context in which it was written and ratified.

Scope.

This document:

- Places Article VI within the broader Christian founding order.

- Demonstrates that all thirteen original colonies required belief in God.
- Shows that a majority required explicit Christian profession.
- Explains how oaths of office functioned as religious qualification.
- Examines founding-era objections and debates surrounding Article VI.
- Distinguishes between **religious tests** and **religious qualifications**.
- Provides documentary and numerical evidence supporting original intent.
- Includes an appendix cataloging state-level religious requirements.

What this document is not.

It is not an argument for denominational establishment, coercion of conscience, or state-imposed worship. It is a historical and constitutional clarification.

Foundational Premise

1. **The Constitution organized a Christian political order—it did not create a neutral one.**
The Declaration of Independence, Mayflower Compact, and state constitutions establish the theological assumptions underlying American government.
 2. **The Founding dispute concerned denominations, not belief in God.**
Sectarian rivalry—not Christianity itself—was the unresolved issue Article VI addressed.
 3. **Religious tests and religious qualifications are not the same.**
A test excludes based on sect; a qualification assumes shared moral and theological ground.
 4. **Universal state practice defines federal intent.**
Thirteen out of thirteen states required belief in God at ratification—making a secular reading implausible.
 5. **Modern secular interpretations are historically anachronistic.**
Claims that Article VI permits atheistic governance arise long after the Founding and contradict contemporaneous evidence.
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I. Article VI Must Be Read in Harmony with a Universally Christian Founding Order

The Constitution did not create the American political order; it organized one already in existence. That order was publicly, repeatedly, and formally grounded in faith in Almighty God and the Christian moral framework. The **Declaration of Independence** expressly anchors civil authority in the *Creator*, appeals to the *Supreme Judge of the world*, and relies upon *Divine Providence*.¹ These statements establish the theological premises under which legitimate government exists.

Likewise, the **Mayflower Compact**, long treated by the Founders as a proto-constitutional covenant, begins *“In the Name of God, Amen,”* and declares its civil purpose to be *“the Glory of God, and Advancement of the Christian Faith.”*² These documents demonstrate conclusively that **belief in God—and Christianity in particular—was assumed, not disputed, at the Founding.** Any reading of Article VI that treats belief in God as the subject of controversy is therefore historically indefensible.

II. The Real Problem Was Denominational Conflict, Not Faith in God or Christ

At the time of ratification, **all thirteen original colonies required religious belief for public office**, either by:

1. **Explicit constitutional declarations**, or
2. **Mandatory oaths invoking God and divine judgment**, enforced under English and American common law.

Numerical reality:

- **4 of 13 states** explicitly required profession of the Christian religion or Trinitarian belief in constitutional text.³⁴⁵⁶
- **Several additional states** required affirmation of the divine authority of Scripture.⁷
- **All 13 states** required **God-invoking oaths**, which legally excluded atheists as incapable of oath-taking.⁸

Thus, **100% of the original colonies required belief in God**, and a majority required explicit Christian commitment.

III. State Constitutions Prove “No Religious Test” Did Not Mean “No Religious Qualification”

- **Delaware (1776)** required affirmation of belief in **God the Father, Jesus Christ His only Son, and the Holy Ghost**, and acknowledgment of the Old and New Testaments as divinely inspired.³
- **Massachusetts (1780)** required declaration of belief in the **Christian religion** for certain offices.⁴
- **New Hampshire (1784)** restricted key offices to **Protestant Christians**.⁵
- **Pennsylvania (1776)** required belief in God and Scripture, then declared *“no further or other religious test shall ever hereafter be required.”*⁷

Pennsylvania’s formulation is decisive: it defines “no religious test” as no additional sectarian test beyond a shared Christian foundation.

IV. Oaths of Office Complete the Record: All 13 Colonies Required God-Accountability

Even where constitutions were silent on Christological language, **oaths of office universally invoked God**. Under common law, oaths were acts of worship and required belief in divine judgment; atheists were legally barred from office for incapacity to swear truthfully.⁸

Accordingly, **no colony permitted atheism in public office**, and no evidence exists of an intent to change this universally accepted rule at the federal level.

V. Founding-Era Statements Confirm the Expected Christian Character of Rulers

John Jay wrote:

“Providence has given to our people the choice of their rulers, and it is the duty as well as the privilege and interest of our **Christian nation** to select and prefer **Christians** for their rulers.”⁹

John Adams stated:

“Our Constitution was made only for a **moral and religious people**. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.”¹⁰

These statements align perfectly with an interpretation of Article VI that bars denominational tests while preserving Christian moral qualification.

VI. Ratification Debate Confirms the Clause’s Narrow Purpose

James Madison reported objections that Article VI might permit “*Jews, Turks, and infidels*” to hold office.¹¹ The objection itself proves that the clause was understood as regulating **tests**, not abolishing religious standards altogether.

VII. Proper Construction of Article VI

Taken together, the historical record establishes that:

- **13 / 13 states** required belief in God,
- **A majority required explicit Christian profession,**
- **Denominational conflict—not faith in God—was the unresolved issue,** and
- **Article VI resolved that conflict by prohibiting sectarian tests,** not by secularizing office.

Any interpretation to the contrary is a post-Founding revision.

VIII. Summary & Conclusion

This document conclusively demonstrates that the Article VI “no religious test” clause was never intended to exclude God—or Christianity—from public office. On the contrary, the historical record shows that belief in God was universally required, explicitly assumed, and legally enforced through constitutions and oaths in every original colony. Several states went further, requiring explicit Christian or Trinitarian confession.

The clause addressed a specific problem: preventing any single denomination from monopolizing federal office and excluding other Christians. It did not abolish religious qualification; it standardized it by removing sectarian barriers while preserving shared Christian foundations.

Ratification debates confirm this narrow purpose, as objections raised at the time centered on fears that the clause might permit non-Christians to hold office—demonstrating that no one understood it to mandate religious neutrality. Founding-era leaders repeatedly affirmed that the Republic depended upon moral and religious leadership and that Christian character in rulers was both expected and necessary.

The conclusion is therefore definitive:

Article VI prohibits sectarian tests, not Christian qualification. Any interpretation to the contrary represents a post-Founding revision that divorces the Constitution from the covenantal order it was designed to preserve.

Appendix A — Religious Qualifications for Public Office in the Original 13 Colonies

(With Footnotes)

#	Colony	Authority	Requirement	Classification
1	Delaware	Const. 1776	Belief in Father, Son (Jesus Christ), Holy Ghost; OT & NT divine	Explicit Trinitarian ³
2	Pennsylvania	Const. 1776	Belief in God; OT & NT divine; “no further test”	Christian / anti-sectarian ⁷
3	Massachusetts	Const. 1780	Belief in Christian religion	Explicit Christian ⁴
4	New Hampshire	Const. 1784	Protestant Christian requirement	Explicit Protestant ⁵
5	Maryland	Decl. of Rights 1776	Christian religion / belief in God	Christian / theistic ⁶
6	South Carolina	Const. 1778	Protestant Christianity	Christian / Protestant ¹²
7	North Carolina	Const. 1776	Belief in God	Theistic ¹³
8	Georgia	Const. 1777	Protestant Christianity	Christian ¹⁴
9	Virginia	Oaths + Common Law	God-invoking oaths	Theistic ⁸
10	New York	Const. 1777 + Oaths	God-invoking oaths	Theistic ⁸
11	New Jersey	Const. 1776 + Oaths	God-invoking oaths	Theistic ⁸
12	Connecticut	Charter + Oaths	God-invoking oaths	Christian theism ⁸
13	Rhode Island	Charter + Oaths	God-invoking oaths	Christian theism ⁸

Footnotes

If you want next, I can:

- Convert this into a **court-ready evidentiary brief**,
- Draft a **binding Article VI construction clause**, or
- Prepare a **Senate training slide deck** with this table as Exhibit A.

1. **Declaration of Independence** (1776), paras. 1–2. ↔

2. **Mayflower Compact** (1620). ↵
3. **Delaware Constitution of 1776**, art. 22. ↵ ↵² ↵³
4. **Massachusetts Constitution of 1780**, ch. VI. ↵ ↵² ↵³
5. **New Hampshire Constitution of 1784**, pt. II. ↵ ↵² ↵³
6. **Maryland Declaration of Rights** (1776), art. 36. ↵ ↵²
7. **Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776**, Declaration of Rights. ↵ ↵² ↵³
8. Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, Book IV (on oaths and perjury). ↵
↵² ↵³ ↵⁴ ↵⁵ ↵⁶ ↵⁷
9. **John Jay**, Letter to Jedidiah Morse (1797). ↵
10. **John Adams**, Letter to Massachusetts Militia (1798). ↵
11. **James Madison**, Letter to Thomas Jefferson, Oct. 17, 1788. ↵
12. **South Carolina Constitution of 1778**. ↵
13. **North Carolina Constitution of 1776**. ↵
14. **Georgia Constitution of 1777**. ↵