

Religion and the Founding of the American Republic
<https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/religion/rel07.html>

Sections: [America as a Religious Refuge: The Seventeenth Century](#) | [Religion in Eighteenth-Century America](#) | [Religion and the American Revolution](#) | [Religion and the Congress of the Confederation, 1774-89](#) | [Religion and the State Governments](#) | [Religion and the Federal Government](#) | [Religion and the New Republic](#)

Religion and the Federal Government, Part 1

In response to widespread sentiment that to survive the United States needed a stronger federal government, a convention met in Philadelphia in the summer of 1787 and on September 17 adopted the Constitution of the United States. Aside from Article VI, which stated that "no religious Test shall ever be required as Qualification" for federal office holders, the Constitution said little about religion. Its reserve troubled two groups of Americans--those who wanted the new instrument of government to give faith a larger role and those who feared that it would do so. This latter group, worried that the Constitution did not prohibit the kind of state-supported religion that had flourished in some colonies, exerted pressure on the members of the First Federal Congress. In September 1789 the Congress adopted the First Amendment to the Constitution, which, when ratified by the required number of states in December 1791, forbade Congress to make any law "respecting an establishment of religion."

The first two Presidents of the United States were patrons of religion--George Washington was an Episcopal vestryman, and John Adams described himself as "a church going animal." Both offered strong rhetorical support for religion. In his Farewell Address of September 1796, Washington called religion, as the source of morality, "a necessary spring of popular government," while Adams claimed that statesmen "may plan and speculate for Liberty, but it is Religion and Morality alone, which can establish the Principles upon which Freedom can securely stand." Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, the third and fourth Presidents, are generally considered less hospitable to religion than their predecessors, but evidence presented in this section shows that, while in office, both offered religion powerful symbolic support.

Religion and the Constitution

When the Constitution was submitted to the American public, "many pious people" complained that the document had slighted God, for it contained "no recognition of his mercies to us . . . or even of his existence." The Constitution was reticent about religion for two reasons: first, many delegates were committed federalists, who believed that the power to legislate on religion, if it existed at all, lay within the domain of the state, not the national, governments; second, the delegates believed that it would be a tactical mistake to introduce

such a politically controversial issue as religion into the Constitution. The only "religious clause" in the document--the proscription of religious tests as qualifications for federal office in Article Six--was intended to defuse controversy by disarming potential critics who might claim religious discrimination in eligibility for public office.

That religion was not otherwise addressed in the Constitution did not make it an "irreligious" document any more than the Articles of Confederation was an "irreligious" document. The Constitution dealt with the church precisely as the Articles had, thereby maintaining, at the national level, the religious status quo¹. In neither document did the people yield any explicit power to act in the field of religion. But the absence of expressed powers² did not prevent either the Continental-Confederation Congress or the Congress under the Constitution from sponsoring a program to support general, nonsectarian³ religion.

¹ status quo: the existing state of affairs, especially regarding social or political issues: *Policy makers, who seem to promote political party ideology, have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo.*

² expressed powers: noun: the Enumerated powers of the United States Congress are listed in Article I, Section 8 of the United States Constitution. In summary, Congress may exercise the powers that the Constitution grants it, subject to the individual rights listed in the Bill of Rights. See Appendix

³ nonsectarian: adjective: not involving or relating to a specific religious sect or political group

APPENDIX

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enumerated_powers_\(United_States\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enumerated_powers_(United_States))

List of enumerated powers of the federal constitution

The Congress shall have Power To lay and collect Taxes, Duties, Imposts and Excises, to pay the Debts and provide for the common Defense and general Welfare of the United States; but all Duties, Imposts and Excises shall be uniform throughout the United States;

To borrow on the credit of the United States;

To regulate Commerce with foreign Nations, and among the several States, and with the Indian Tribes;

To establish a uniform Rule of Naturalization, and uniform Laws on the subject of Bankruptcies throughout the United States;

To coin Money, regulate the Value thereof, and of foreign Coin, and fix the Standard of Weights and Measures;

To provide for the Punishment of counterfeiting the Securities and current Coin of the United States;

To establish Post Offices and Post Roads;

To promote the Progress of Science and useful Arts, by securing for limited Times to Authors and Inventors the exclusive Right to their respective Writings and Discoveries;

To constitute Tribunals inferior to the supreme Court;

To define and punish Piracies and Felonies committed on the high Seas, and Offenses against the Law of Nations;

To declare War, grant Letters of Marque and Reprisal, and make Rules concerning Captures on Land and Water;

To raise and support Armies, but no Appropriation of Money to that Use shall be for a longer Term than two Years;

To provide and maintain a Navy;

To make Rules for the Government and Regulation of the land and naval Forces;

To provide for calling forth the Militia to execute the Laws of the Union, suppress Insurrections and repel Invasions;

To provide for organizing, arming, and disciplining, the Militia, and for governing such Part of them as may be employed in the Service of the United States, reserving to the States respectively, the Appointment of the Officers, and the Authority of training the Militia according to the discipline prescribed by Congress;

To exercise exclusive Legislation in all Cases whatsoever, over such District (not exceeding ten Miles square) as may, by Cession of particular States, and the acceptance of Congress, become

the Seat of the Government of the United States, and to exercise like Authority over all Places purchased by the Consent of the Legislature of the State in which the Same shall be, for the Erection of Forts, Magazines, Arsenals, dock-Yards, and other needful Buildings; And

To make all Laws which shall be necessary and proper for carrying into Execution the foregoing Powers, and all other Powers vested by this Constitution in the Government of the United States, or in any Department or Officer thereof.

— Article I, Section 8 of the United States Constitution

In addition to the above, Congress is granted a power by Article III Section 3: “The Congress shall have Power to declare the Punishment of Treason, but no Attainder of Treason shall work Corruption of Blood, or Forfeiture except during the Life of the Person attainted.” Congress is also granted a power by Article IV Section 3: “The Congress shall have Power to dispose of and make all needful Rules and Regulations respecting the Territory or other Property belonging to the United States; and nothing in this Constitution shall be so construed as to Prejudice any Claims of the United States, or of any particular State.”

Several amendments explicitly grant Congress additional powers. For example, the Sixteenth Amendment grants the power to "lay and collect taxes on incomes, from whatever source derived."