Endowed?

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The Declaration of Independence cites the "Laws of Nature and of Nature's God" and asserts that men "are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights." Before John Hancock and his fellow patriots signed their names to the document that created a nation, they acknowledged their "firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence."

The Declaration remains on display in the National Archives. The site's classical architecture and venerated relics recall temples and shrines. Visitors resemble pilgrims. The atmosphere is that of a great cathedral.

By displaying a document with the vivid religious imagery of the Declaration, is the Archives violating the Constitution? Is the Declaration an affront to the separation of church and state?

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Alabama chief justice Roy Moore was wrong. When a federal judge ruled that the monument to the Ten Commandments had to go, he had an obligation to obey. He was wrong to defy his colleagues on the state supreme court who ordered him to do as the federal judge said. Moore also is easy to mock. When ideologues and swanks dismiss him as a Bible-thumping rube, they draw attention only to their own prejudices and hates. How many have listened to what he has to say? In a column for The Wall Street Journal, Moore writes:

The battle over the Ten Commandments monument I brought into Alabama's Supreme Court is not about a monument and not about politics. (The battle is not even about religion, a term defined by our Founders as "the duty we owe to our creator and the manner for discharging it.") Federal Judge Myron Thompson, who ordered the monument's removal, and I are in perfect agreement on the fact that the issue in this case is: "Can the state acknowledge God?" Those were the precise words used by Judge Thompson in his closing remarks in open court. Today, I argue for the rule of law, and against any unilateral declaration of a judge to ban the acknowledgment of God in the public sector. We must acknowledge God in the public sector because the state constitution explicitly requires us to do so. The Alabama Constitution specially invokes "the favor and guidance of Almighty God" as the basis for our laws and justice system.

Thompson implicitly has held the Alabama Constitution unconstitutional.

The Declaration of Independence acknowledges God, too.

The logic of Thompson's ruling suggests the Declaration does not belong on government property. The point is of course preposterous and not meant to be taken seriously - at least by serious minds. Yet it is where constitutional reasoning indifferent to history leads. The constitutional tradition as it has evolved in the United States draws not only from secular philosophy but from religion. The Declaration and the Constitution did not spring from voids but resulted from centuries of secular and religious thought. The background to the idea of liberty and the rule of law includes the Commandments. To acknowledge religion's centrality is not to say individuals must believe in a specific denomination - or even in God. Americans are free to believe or not to believe. They also

live in a country whose ideals and governmental structure owe a great debt to religion. The act of acknowledgment is an expression of humility a society as narcissistic as ours might want to contemplate.

Contributions can be acknowledged in different ways. Many devout believers are uncomfortable with public displays - which does not mean such displays always are forbidden. The controversial monument was a monstrosity that did little to promote an appreciation for the roots of constitutional order. Moore was wrong to defy the court. The deeper issues deserve a hearing more profound than the weary cliches so typical of public discourse on religion's place in the public square. Has the U.S. really reached the point where government cannot acknowledge what honest citizens know to be true - i.e., that religion lies at the heart of the American experiment? Verily, can the state acknowledge God?

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