

Religion and State in the US – Source

Gilbert Keith Chesterton (1874–1936) was an English writer and journalist. In his autobiographical essay he poses the question What is America? Which he answers as follows:

In short, it is to get some ultimate idea of what America *is*; and the answer to that question will reveal something much deeper and grander and more worthy of our intelligent interest [...]

5 America is the only nation in the world that is founded on a creed. That creed is set forth with dogmatic and even theological lucidity in the Declaration of Independence; perhaps the only piece of practical politics that is also theoretical politics and
10 also great literature. It enunciates that all men are equal in their claim to justice, that governments exist to give them that justice, and that their authority is for that reason just. It certainly does condemn anarchism. and it does also by inference
15 condemn atheism, since it clearly names the Crea-

tor as the ultimate authority from whom these equal rights are derived. [...] The point is that there is a creed, if not about divine, at least about human things. [...]

20 There is something of the same idea at the back of the great American experiment; the experiment of a democracy of diverse races which has been compared to a melting-pot. But even that metaphor implies that the pot itself is of a certain shape and a certain substance; a pretty solid substance. [...] America invites all men to become citizens; but it implies the dogma that there is such a thing as citizenship. Only, so far as its primary ideal is concerned, its exclusiveness is religious [...].

Gilbert K. Chesterton: What I saw in America. London 1922, pp. 7–9, http://www.gutenberg.org/files/27250/27250-h/27250-h.htm#The_Spirit_of_America

Tasks

1. Find out the definition and the function(s) of a creed.
2. Explain the relation between religion and the United States according to Chesterton.
3. Discuss from today's point of view Chesterton's characterization the USA being a "nation founded on a creed".