

Reflections

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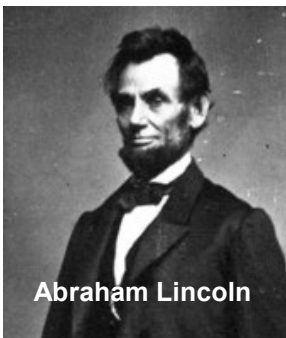
AMERICA'S CREED

Throughout American history, it has been a belief in God and an adherence to the moral and ethical principles derived from that belief that have provided the country's binding force. They have been, and continue to be, central to the concept and practice of American democracy.

G.K. Chesterton wrote that "America is the only nation in the world that is founded on creed. That creed is set forth with dogmatic and even theological lucidity in the Declaration of Independence." He further suggests that as America is populated by people from diverse cultural and historical backgrounds, fidelity to that dogma defines who Americans are and keeps our nation intact. The old nations of Europe, in contrast, did not need a creed. Their identities were established by national traditions that had evolved over centuries.

Belief in a Divine Being and the exercise of religion underlie our national view of the rights we have, our relationship to the state, our purpose in the world, and how we react to various injustices. The Declaration of Independence proclaimed and justified the end of British rule over America on the basis that "all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights." From its very beginning, the nation recognized the existence of a Supreme Being and that every person has innate prerogatives as a result of being created in God's image and likeness.

The Constitution established a government based on those beliefs in order to secure the unalienable rights. The Bill of Rights, that is, the first ten Amendments to the Constitution, specifies the most basic endowments of the American people. The first of the Amendments states that the government shall not interfere with the right of the people to practice religion by either supporting the establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof. In this manner, the political and religious spheres are meant to be distinct. The state is not to interfere in the activities of the church, and the church is not to dictate policy to the state. The First Amendment does not mean that any mention of God or the expression of religious beliefs cannot be made in the public sphere, but rather that the state is to remain neutral toward religion, neither promoting a given set of religious beliefs nor interfering in their practice.



Abraham Lincoln

Religion has had a role in virtually every social movement in America, and continues to shape public policy. When the Civil War and the issue of slavery confronted the nation in the mid-1800s, Abraham Lincoln declared that "this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom," as it is "dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." This was a reaffirmation of the God-given dignity of man, a recognition that gave rise to several Constitutional Amendments

to delineate the rights of Americans. The strong religious sentiments of the abolitionist movement led to the Thirteenth Amendment, which ended slavery and involuntary servitude. A few years later, the Fifteenth Amendment was passed guaranteeing that the right to vote “shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.”

Religion played a role in women’s suffrage activities, which led to the Nineteenth Amendment extending the right to vote to women. It was a prominent factor in labor reform to abolish child labor, regulate the hours of work by mothers, and eliminate the 12-hour day for men, as well as in the social movements of the early 20th century to help the poor and immigrants improve their lives through better housing, education, health care, and the eradication of slums. In the 1960s, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his clerical colleagues relied on religious belief and rhetoric to advance the civil rights movement. Currently, religion is very much a part of the societal debates on abortion and the definition of marriage.

Religion and public discussion of major issues have been intertwined throughout American history by religious leaders illuminating the moral implications of social conditions, political decisions and legislative actions. Churches not only have a right, but an obligation to speak out on issues of war, injustice, violence, freedom, the dignity of the individual, the protection of human life, and other social issues, in order to assure that conditions of justice and peace exist in which individuals and communities can flourish.

Today, with changing European demographics and the large influx of guest workers and immigrants possessing very different cultures, ideologies and religions, it can be argued that those traditions are becoming so diluted that they can no longer satisfactorily define a European, or even an Englishman, Frenchman, or German. Can a united Europe, or its individual nations, continue to exist without the binding force of a common creed? Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI have decried this change as the loss of Europe’s Christian “soul.” If America is not to suffer a similar fate, we must remain “one Nation under God.”

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