

# Endowed By Our Creator

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The Reverend Roger Fritts

Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church

Bethesda, Maryland

One of the things I missed when I was away on a working sabbatical in Scotland this past summer, is the celebration of the Fourth of July. Several times in the past I have gone down to the capital to hear the National Symphony Orchestra play the outdoor concert in front of the Capitol. Around 9:00 p.m. they play Tchaikovsky's "1812 Overture" and as the overture ends, the military fires real cannons. On the 4<sup>th</sup>, an ordinary work day in the United Kingdom, I thought about the fact that half a million people would be watching fireworks explode near the Washington Monument, lighting up the sky with bright explosions of color and light. I thought about people around the nation watching their own fireworks displays in large and small towns across America, while eating hamburgers, hotdogs and potato chips, and drinking sodas or beer. Instead of potato chips and soda, as the 4<sup>th</sup> approached, sitting in Scotland, I studied the history of the Declaration of Independence.

I read that the purpose of the document was to encourage the French government to provide aid to the American colonies. The colonial army was in desperate need of supplies from France. However, getting any major commitment from France was hard while the colonies lacked international legal standing. They were not a corporate body that could enter a contract. In international law they were still part of England engaged in a civil war. Aiding

them would be an entry into England's internal affairs. Before the colonies could make treaties with France, they had to become a treaty making entity. Also, the colonists could not expect France to negotiate thirteen different treaties with each of the little states in America. So the purpose of the Congress was to create one legal confederation with the power to make a treaty with France. Nineteen months after the passing of the Declaration of Independence the French did enter the war on the side of the American rebels. They hoped to dilute British power.

The men who voted for the Declaration of Independence had no idea how important it would become. Today, Americans celebrate it as a key document in United States history. This is primarily because of the preamble, the first words of the document. They are a religious statement.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

Thirty-three-year-old Thomas Jefferson did not invent these phrases. The ideas that he wrote were the result of a series of historical events.

Of course history is continuous, but I like to start the story of our Declaration of Independence in the year 1450. That year Gutenberg completed work on a printing system using metal movable type that made books easier to print and cheaper to own. The intellectual revolution that led to our deceleration of independence came after this technological breakthrough in communication.

The next big milestone was 1534, when Martin Luther completed his translation of the Bible into German, encouraging all

Protestants to learn to read so that they could have direct access to the Bible.

In 1560, the Protestant reformer John Knox called for a national system of education in Scotland, so that everyone could read the Bible.

In 1579, George Buchanan, the father of Scottish Presbyterianism, published *The Law of Government Among the Scots*, asserting that all political authority ultimately belongs to the people. He said people should come together to elect someone to manage their affairs. If a ruler failed to act in the people's interest, citizens had the sacred right and duty to resist that tyrant.

In 1696, the Scottish Parliament voted to establish a school in every parish in Scotland so that everyone could read Holy Scripture. They were finally acting on John Knox's recommendation made one hundred thirty-six years before.

In 1707, the Scottish Parliament voted for union with England. Union with England led to a lucrative tobacco trade between Glasgow, Scotland and the colony of Virginia. By 1725, Scottish merchants controlled 15% of the tobacco trade. By 1745, they controlled 100 percent of the trade. Molasses, sugar, cotton, and tea also arrived in Scotland, and finished goods such as linen textiles and cotton products began to flow out.

At the same time because of the work and vision of George Buchanan, by the 18th century Scotland had the most democratic system of church government in Europe. Because of its system of free education, in the 18th century Scotland became Europe's first modern, literate society.

The Scottish people read not only the Bible, but other books as well. The barriers of religious censorship came down in the 18th century and a literary explosion occurred. Intellectuals wrote not

just for other intellectuals but for the general reading public. By the 1750s, virtually every town of any size had a local lending library. In Edinburgh the book trade became an important part of the local economy. Six publishing houses were operating in the city by 1763. Papermaking became a mainstay of the national economy. The Scottish universities became international centers of learning and drew students from across Protestant Europe. The money from the trade in tobacco helped fund Scottish universities.

A founder of the Scottish Enlightenment was a Presbyterian minister named Francis Hutcheson. Hutcheson was born in Northern Ireland in 1694. As a teenager he went to Glasgow to study theology. One of his professors was a man named John Simson. Simson directly challenged the harshest of Calvinist thought. He said that the world around us is not the realm of the devil. The world reflects the purposes of God in its symmetry and its beauty. Simson even cast doubt on the Trinity, and on the idea that Jesus was the son of God.

These lectures by John Simson both attracted and troubled Francis Hutcheson. He was troubled by the idea that the Bible might not be the word of God and therefore the Bible could not be the source of universal ethical rules. This could lead to moral relativism, the position that all moral rules are the result of social, cultural, historical or personal circumstances, not universal truths. So in one society people can be monogamous, while in another society they could be polygamists. One society can require women to wear head scarves, and another society can ban the wearing of headscarves. Moral relativism argues that all these moral rules are the result of social, cultural, historical or personal circumstances, and there is no such thing as universal ethical rules.

When Hutcheson became a professor at the University of Glasgow he created an answer to moral relativism. He argued that besides our five senses of seeing, hearing, touching, tasting and smelling, humans have a sixth sense. God created and endowed us with a

sense that grasps nature's moral laws. All human beings are born with this moral sense. We are all born with a fundamental understanding of the nature of right and wrong.

Our five physical senses make us unequal. For example, some of us are blind, some of us have hearing loss, we are all different. However, Hutcheson said, these physical differences are not important. Our moral sense is our most important sense. It makes us all equals, it gives us all our dignity, it makes human beings self-governing.

Hutcheson taught that the ultimate goal in life is happiness. By happiness, he did not mean physical pleasure. He believed that we become happy by helping other people. Our moral sense tells us, if we listen to it, that the goal of our life is to be happy, and that we become happy when we are kind, benevolent and caring towards other people. This positive view of human nature became one of the most powerful ideas of the Scottish Enlightenment.

If people find true happiness only in helping others, this provides the basis of all social organization, including government. Hutcheson said we can only pursue happiness if we are free to help others. Therefore, he opposed restrictions on the freedom of women, arguing that human rights are universal and do not recognize any distinction based on gender. He opposed slavery, arguing that the greatest cause of unhappiness in the world was slavery. Hutcheson believed in maximizing personal liberty so that all of us would be free to pursue happiness by helping others. This Presbyterian minister and professor was the first to say "that action is best which accomplishes the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers."

Hutcheson died in 1746, but his ideas lived on in the works of other Scottish Enlightenment philosophers.

In Edinburgh, David Hume substituted the word "heart" for Francis Hutcheson's phrase "moral sense." Hume argued that the head discerns fact and that our heart discerns right, and that therefore the heart is superior to the head.

In Aberdeen, Thomas Reid substituted the phrases "common sense" and "self-evident truths" for Francis Hutcheson's phrase "moral sense." Reid argued that the basic moral perceptions of common people are equal and valid to those of philosophers and scientists.

In the 1750s and 1760s, the tobacco trade resulted in frequent contact between citizens in Scotland and citizens in Virginia. One who came from Scotland to Virginia in 1758 was a man named William Small. After college in Aberdeen, William Small came to Williamsburg, Virginia at the age of 24. He came to teach mathematics at the College of William and Mary. However, after most of the other faculty members left, William Small became the professor of practically everything.

Thomas Jefferson arrived as an undergraduate at the College of William and Mary in 1760. He was 16 years old. In his autobiography Jefferson wrote "It was my great good fortune, and what properly fix the destinies of my life, that Dr. William Small of Scotland was then Professor of mathematics." Small exposed young Jefferson to the writings of Scottish Enlightenment thinkers. Because of Small, Jefferson studied the ideas of Francis Hutcheson, Thomas Reid and David Hume.

When Jefferson arrived in Philadelphia in May of 1776, he had been studying Scottish Enlightenment philosophers for sixteen years. He was not alone. Out of the fifty-six signers of the Declaration of Independence, twenty-one came from Scottish backgrounds. The most famous of these was John Witherspoon, President of Princeton University, who had moved from Scotland to Princeton in 1768. Witherspoon used the University of

Edinburgh as a model for the design of classes at Princeton University.

When Jefferson circulated his draft of the Declaration of Independence, many in the room found the phrases and sentences familiar. He wrote:

We hold these truths to be self-evident

Those in the room who were familiar with the works of Thomas Reid recognized the words “self evident” as coming from Reid’s writings.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal

Jefferson took this idea from Francis Hutcheson who had argued that, whether we are male or female, black or white, tall or short, God created everyone with the same moral sense. To complete the sentence Jefferson then referred to Francis Hutcheson’s belief that the purpose of our life is to pursue happiness by helping others and to Hutcheson’s belief that we can help others only if we have liberty. Jefferson wrote:

We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

Every summer, on July 4<sup>th</sup> the people of the United States celebrate these words. In Washington the National Symphony Orchestra plays a concert outside in front of the Capitol. Around 9:00 p.m. they play Tchaikovsky’s “1812 Overture.” Tchaikovsky wrote the music to commemorate the unsuccessful French invasion into Russia. The overture ends with the orchestra playing the anthem “God Save the Tsar!” We Americans like to hear the overture on

the Fourth of July because we like the cannon fire. We have been borrowing from other cultures for a long time.

Our music is from Russia. Our fireworks are from China. And the ideas we celebrate—they were not derived primarily from Philadelphia, or Paris, or London. They came to America from Aberdeen, from Glasgow and from Edinburgh. We really should have someone with a Scottish accent say:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Sources:

Herman, Arthur, *How the Scots Invented the Modern World*, Three Rivers Press, New York, 2001.

Wills, Garry, *Inventing America, Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence*, Vintage Books, New York, 1978.