

## 6: Freedom, Virtue and Conscience

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The great civilizations of history have all followed a similar pattern – they rose to world prominence, then deteriorated, declined, and fell. Each of them shared a significant, but common trait -- a forerunner of their decline was a turning away from their God or gods. If America is not to follow the same path, our public and private actions must be guided by the virtue and morality that is developed by religion and sustained by a belief in a Supreme Being.

The freedom for which America was established is freedom under God, a God who endowed us with individual worth, free will, and inviolable rights. This American ideal is that of liberty ordered by universally recognized moral principles which exist independently of man. Its continuance is possible only when the people as a whole are self-disciplined in accord with the imperatives of a universal moral law. Then through the workings of political, social and other subsidiary institutions these norms are adapted to the secular order of the community as binding upon its actions. It is a delusion to think that a people who do not govern their appetites in their private lives are capable of self-government in public life. America, in this sense, is more than a political undertaking; it is a spiritual and moral enterprise.

A society cannot exist without order, and one that is free requires that order evolve upward from the people and not be imposed downward by the leaders or rulers of the nation. This is particularly true of America, which has been organized, through its Constitution, as a government of, by, and for the people. The authority to govern rests with the people, which they exercise through their freely-elected representatives. If Americans are to retain the freedoms they were given, then they must make responsible use of those freedoms.

The nation's Founding Fathers had a fundamental belief that only a virtuous people can remain free, and that the preservation of the American ideal would depend upon the virtue of the people who are part of it. Human nature, however, is colored by an individual's passions and self-interest. If these appetites are not restrained, and the universal moral values upon whose shared possession the self-discipline of a free society depends are not vigorous enough to restrain the selfish passions of men, the foundations of society are endangered. It was with this recognition that the British statesman and political philosopher Edmund Burke, in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, in 1790, could state: "[W]hat is liberty without wisdom and without virtue? It is the greatest of all possible evils; for it is folly, vice, and madness, without tuition or restraint."

Freedom must be fettered by adherence to a virtuous conscience. If one's actions are limited internally by moral principles, they do not have to be constrained externally by societal rules and laws. The more a moral conscience guides one's behavior, the less need there is for external controls and the more freedom one



can have. Lord Acton, the 19<sup>th</sup> century, British, Catholic historian, viewed freedom as “not the power of doing what we like, but the right of being able to do what we ought.”

It was a strong belief of the Founding Americans that the consensus upon which a free society depends for its strength and permanence could be developed and sustained by individual judgments, shaped by the virtue and morality that is taught by religion. Thus, a truly free society must develop in its people virtues, such as duty, responsibility, obligation, honesty, and self-sacrifice. It does this best through religion which teaches people about their individual worth, uniqueness, human dignity, and the equality of all people.

America is continuing to move toward secularism and moral relativism. Its treatment of irreligion as equal to religion, its recent emphasis on freedom without regard for moral and spiritual restraint, and the growing view that religious belief is strictly a private affair have relegated religion to having little more than a ceremonial role in public life. Freedom is becoming license, while agnosticism is rampant in the arts,



entertainment, politics, economics, social norms, and culture in general. The key to the future revitalization and maintenance of the American ideal is the development of the individual conscience in accord with the tenets of a spiritual authority and under the guidance of religion.

President Ronald Reagan expressed his concern for America’s future very well when he stated: “Without God, there is no virtue, because there's no prompting of the conscience. Without God, we're mired in the material, that flat world that tells us only what the senses perceive. Without God, there is a coarsening of the society. And without God, democracy will not and cannot long endure.”