

Scotland and the American Declaration of Independence  
Unitarian Universalist Church of Sarasota  
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Friday of this week, we will celebrate Independence Day. In Washington, the National Symphony Orchestra will play an outdoor concert in front of the Capitol. Around 9:00 p.m. they will play Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture and as the overture ends, the military will fire real cannons. While 700,000 people watch, fireworks will explode near the Washington Monument lighting up the sky with bright explosions of color and light. The Public Broadcast System will show the National Capital fireworks live on television, but most people will not be watching television. They will be outside watching their own fireworks displays in large and small towns across America, while eating hamburgers, hotdogs and potato chips and drinking sodas or beer.

In 1776, Thomas Jefferson arrived late to attend the meetings of the Continental Congress in Philadelphia. Thirty-three years old and the youngest member of the Congress, Jefferson had not been part of the original Virginia delegation. He was sent as a substitute for another delegate who had to return to Virginia. The 11th of June 1776 the other delegates appointed Jefferson to serve on a committee to draft a Declaration of Independence. The four other members of the committee asked him to write the first draft.

The goal 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. In addition, the colonists could not expect France to negotiate thirteen different treaties with each of the individual states in America. Therefore, 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. The French hoped to weaken 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 philosophical 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.”

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

In 1450 Gutenberg completed work on a printing system using metal movable type that made

books easier to print and cheaper to own.

In 1534, 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 John Knox, the great Reformer of the Scottish Church, was determined to produce a Bible in English. Translators completed his New Testament in 1557, and they published a complete English Bible in 1560. Today scholars call this translation the Geneva Bible. Knox called for a national system of education in Scotland, so that everyone could read his Bible.

In 1696 (following John Knox's recommendation made one hundred thirty-six years before) the Scottish Parliament, controlled by Presbyterians, voted to establish a school in every parish in Scotland so that everyone could read Holy Scripture. Because of its system of free education, Scotland became Europe's first modern literate society.

In 1698, their leaders decided that they needed their own Colony in the New World, so the leaders invested all the wealth of Scotland in an expedition to colonize Panama. The effort was a disaster and bankrupted the country. The bankruptcy played a leading role in convincing the Scots elite to back a union with England, creating, in 1707, the United Kingdom of Great Britain.

With trade tariffs with England now abolished, tobacco trade blossomed, especially with Virginia. Glasgow was the world's premier tobacco port, dominating world trade in highly addictive drug nicotine. American plantation owners captured Africans and forced them to provide free labor. Slavery made the tobacco trade especially profitable.

Meanwhile, because of John Knox and the Presbyterians, most Scottish people had learned to read. When they finished reading the Bible, many asked, "So what else is there to read?" With universal literacy, writers wrote not just for a few intellectuals but also for the public. A literary explosion occurred. By the 1750s, virtually every town of any size in Scotland 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. By 1790, sixteen publishing houses were in operation. Papermaking became a mainstay of the national economy. The Scottish universities became international centers of learning and drew students from across Protestant Europe.

The flow of money from the tobacco trade combined with nearly universal literacy led to the funding of universities in Edinburgh, Glasgow and Saint Andrews. This led to the Scottish Enlightenment.

At the University of Glasgow, a Presbyterian minister, Francis Hutcheson, became a professor of theology. Hutcheson argued that besides our five senses of seeing, hearing, touching, tasting and smelling, God created humans with a sixth sense. We are born, he said, 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.

Hutcheson argued that our physical senses make us unequal. Some of us are blind, some of us have hearing loss, some of us are tall, some are short and so on. Looking at our physical

differences, we cannot say that all people are created equal. However, Hutcheson said these physical differences were not important. Our moral sense is our most important sense because our moral sense makes us all equals. Because all of us are born with a moral sense, we do not need a King and a Queen to rule us. Using our moral sense, we can govern ourselves.

Francis Hutcheson did not stop here. He said that the ultimate goal in our lives is happiness. He did not, however, mean by happiness physical pleasure. Hutcheson believed that by helping other people we become happy. Our moral sense tells us that the goal of our life is to be happy, and that we become happy when we are kind, benevolent and caring toward other people. This positive view of human nature became a key idea of the Scottish Enlightenment.

Francis Hutchinson said we only find true happiness only in helping others. This provides the basis of all social organization, because 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.
- He believed in maximizing personal liberty so that all of us would be free to pursue happiness by helping others.

This Presbyterian professor was the first to say, "That action is best which accomplishes the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers."

Francis 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 twenty-four. He came to teach mathematics at the College of William and Mary. However, the other faculty members left the College of William and Mary, and 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 sixteen years old. In his autobiography, Jefferson wrote, "It was my great good fortune, and what properly fixed the destinies of my life, that Dr. William Small of Scotland was then Professor of mathematics." Because of Dr. 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 these 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, or black or white, or tall or short, God created everyone equal, 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 are free, 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.”

This week we will celebrate this statement about human nature that comes directly out of the thinking of the Scottish enlightenment. However, 250 years later do we still agree with Francis Hutcheson? Do we believe that we are all created equal, all born with a sixth sense, a moral sense? Are we born knowing the difference between right and wrong?

Today people conduct scientific research on these questions. The Yale Infant Cognition Center published a study in 2007 in the journal *Nature*, showing that in a series of simple morality plays, 6- and 10-month-old babies overwhelmingly preferred "good guys" to "bad guys." "This capacity may serve as the foundation for moral thought and action," the authors wrote. It "may form an essential basis for . . . more abstract concepts of right and wrong." In other words, modern research supports ideals expressed in the first words of the Declaration of Independence. We are equal in the sense that most of us are born with a sense of what is right and wrong.

However, do we agree with Hutcheson that the purpose of life is to pursue happiness by helping

others? Martin Seligman, in his book “Authentic Happiness,” wrote that the students in one of his classes wondered if happiness comes more from the exercise of kindness than it does from having fun. Each student undertook an assignment for the next class to engage in one pleasurable activity and one charitable activity, and write about them both.

It turned out that the afterglow of the pleasurable activity such as hanging out with friends, or watching a movie, or eating a hot fudge sundae, paled in comparison with the effects of acts of kindness. The students found that when their charitable acts were spontaneous and called upon personal strengths, their whole day went better. One student told about how her nephew asked for help with his third grade arithmetic. After an hour of tutoring, she was astonished to discover that for the rest of the day, she could listen better, she was mellower, and people liked her much more than usual. A business student said that he came to the university to learn how to make a lot of money to be happy, but that he was floored to find that he liked helping other people more than spending his money shopping.

Finally, do we agree with Hutcheson's moral imperative? Do we agree, "that action is best which accomplishes the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers?"

In my imagination, I would like to take some of our political leaders to Scotland, teach them about the Scottish Enlightenment and how it influenced our founders. In addition, in my imagination I would take them to the Edinburgh Hospital, where several times I visited Scottish Unitarians. The National Health Service runs the hospital. I would talk to our political leaders about Hutcheson's moral imperative, “that action is best which accomplishes the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers.” We can still learn from Scotland.

Friday evening the people of the United States will celebrate the words of the Declaration of Independence. In Washington, the National Symphony Orchestra will play a concert outside, in front of the Capitol. Around 9:00 p.m. they will 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!" However, Americans like to hear the overture on the Fourth of July because we like the cannon fire. Our music is from Russia. Our fireworks are from China. And the ideas we celebrate—they came from Glasgow, Aberdeen, and Edinburgh.

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.