

Human Rights—Who Decides?

By Peter Bocchino

We live in a day that stresses the diversity and pluralism of the various ethnic groups that permeate this wonderful land. Only in America can you get such a marvelous sampling of the many different cultures represented from around the world. There is certainly no harm in learning about the kind of plurality that pervades this country. In fact, it is incumbent upon us to teach our children about diversity in order to help develop an appreciation and respect for the myriad of American people who have come to live here from cultures all around the world. Yet, we are also obligated to teach our children what is it about the United States that can unify such a diverse population.

Our founding fathers knew that in a country filled with diversity, the founding principles must be based on absolute truth, because absolute truth brings unity out of diversity. Such unifying principles are known as *first principles*, or *self-evident* truths. In a group of essays called the *Logic or Organon*, Aristotle explained how first principles form the bedrock upon which any particular body of knowledge rests. In the same manner, our founding fathers, philosophers in their own right, constructed our government upon certain unifying first principles. These principles were to be guarded and passed on to future generations for the purpose of bringing unity out of diversity.

In contrast to many contemporary leaders, our founding fathers were judicious politicians because they were clear and penetrating thinkers. They understood the axiomatic truths of life and their ultimate justification in the divine lawgiver and author of life and all truth, God. Consequently, the government of this country was to be unified with respect to certain non-negotiable absolute truths. Hence, the founding document that articulated these “Truths” and gave birth to these United States reads as follows:

We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among men.

It is obvious that our founding fathers believed that governments were instituted to *secure* certain human rights—they did not believe that governments were instituted to *create* these rights. They understood that true unity required unity in the truth and knew that all who were to pledge their allegiance to this country must accept these truths in order to bring unity out of diversity. Is there any better place to begin to teach these unifying truths, and to ensure that they are passed down to future generations, than in our classrooms? Certainly one of the best ways to bring unity out of diversity is to teach our children about the truth of, and basis for, this unique Declaration of Independence.

Yet, many educators believe that diversity ought to be stressed and tolerance be taught as the unifying first principle of America. Mortimer J. Adler, distinguished educator and author, explains why pluralism and tolerance must be restricted in order to preserve and build unity:

The doctrinaire liberals of the twentieth century espouse pluralism and tolerance as if they were desirable values on which no restrictions or qualifications should be placed when they are applied to the life of society and of thought . . . Preferences with regard to cuisine, dress, patterns of dance, social manners, artistic style, do not raise any questions of truth. Such matters belong in the sphere of the voluntary. But with regard to matters that belong in the sphere of intellect, matters involving truth not taste, a persistent pluralism is intolerable. . . Pluralism is a desirable policy in all realms of

action and thought **except** those in which unity is required. When unity is required, pluralism must be restricted. For example, a stable and peaceful society cannot exist under the domination of two or more competing governments unless one is subordinate to the other (Mortimer J. Adler, *Truth in Religion: The Plurality of Religions and the Unity of Truth* (New York: Macmillan, 1990), pp.1-3).

Our founding fathers knew that the God-given rights stated in the Declaration of Independence gave *people* intrinsic value—value that no government had the right to deny. The intrinsic value of the individual and the right to live a free life, were thought of as the unifying glue for which our founding fathers were willing to give their lives. So, united under these moral absolutes and self-evident Truths, they started to build a government that submitted itself to a Sovereign God. They forged ahead as one people under God to fight for their freedom.

Today, however, children are being taught ideas that contradict these founding principles. There is no talk of God in the classroom; they are led to believe that all truth and morality is relative and that people decide who has value. At one end of the spectrum of life, they see a government that gives its people the legal right to kill a child in the womb (abortion). At the other end of the spectrum of life, they see a government that allows doctors to assist in killing older people (euthanasia). Consequently, our children see that as a nation we do not value human life at the beginning, nor do they see it valued at the end. Then we wonder why these same children are so divisive and destructive and don't value each other as we watch them bring handguns into the classroom. Do we not understand that we are teaching our children that human life is only as valuable as a society determines it to be? The inherent worth of a human being—ascribed by the Sovereign God who created life—has been reduced to a matter of public—or even worse—individual opinion.

A very clear historical example of the Truths set forth in the Declaration of Independence is the issue of slavery. During the Lincoln-Douglas debates, Douglas was pushing for the slavery issue to be decided at the state level instead of the federal level. However, Lincoln knew that such a decision would seriously endanger the unification of America. He knew that “a house divided cannot stand.” Hence, Lincoln called Douglas to task and reminded him that our government was united under certain self-evident Truths and moral absolutes that were to be secured by our government. Lincoln argued for the truth of those founding principles and the intrinsic value of every human life. He said, “If that declaration is not the truth, let us get the Statute book, in which we find it and tear it out! Who is so bold as to do it!” (July 10, 1858 Speech at Chicago, Illinois). Lincoln valued that declaration more than his own life, even to the point of saying, “I would rather be assassinated on this spot than surrender it” (February 23, 1861 Speech at Independence Hall, Philadelphia).

In our search for a way to bring unity out of diversity, we don't need to look to legislators or educators, nor do we need to be converted to any religion; we merely need to take a harder look at what we already supposedly believe. *Time* magazine once interviewed some of the finest legal, political and academic minds of our nation—seeking advice in correcting the problem of disunity and the collapse of private and public morality. The article culminated with these words.

Interestingly, and perhaps reassuringly, some of the most thoughtful ethicists feel that the elements for an enduring moral consensus are right at hand--in the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, with their combination of Locke's natural rights and Calvin's ultimate right. “It's all there, it's all written down,” says Colgate Philosopher Huntington Terrell. “We don't have to be converted. It's what we have in common.” Terrell calls for a move “forward to the fundamentals,” in which people put their lives where their mouths have been: in line with the country's founding principles (Ezra Bowen, “Looking to Its Roots”, May 25, 1989, p. 29).

Isn't it time to put our lives where our mouths have been: in line with this country's founding principles? It's about time that we step into our classrooms and teach our children that the truths set forth in the Declaration of Independence are the unifying principles that we value more than our own lives. They need to learn we have inherent worth given to us by our Creator and that governments are instituted under God to secure and protect human life and freedom. They must be taught that there are certain unchanging truths and moral absolutes that do not depend upon public, or individual, opinion. These are the basic unifying and immutable truths that give us tremendous latitude to express our individual differences.

It is time to teach our children that the laws of human governments ought to be based on higher moral laws, as stated in the Declaration of Independence. Only then can governments be properly instituted to secure these moral absolutes we call our unalienable rights. If we, as one people under God, believe in absolute truth and morality, then let us teach our children why this is the case and warn them of the consequences of rejecting these truths. However, if it is not the truth, then "let us get the Statute book, in which we find it and tear it out! Who is bold as to do it?"