



# OUR FALSE DIVINE RIGHTS

Carl G. Schowengerdt

# Reading the biographies of our founding fathers is a fascinating journey back in time.

Those were such tumultuous times, the outcome variable day to day, and always in doubt. Our revolutionary army was poorly clothed, poorly fed, often untrained or undisciplined, and often without weapons or ammunition. Those soldiers consisted of combined militias from the states and paid volunteers, many of whom deserted immediately as soon as they saw the conditions they were supposed to tolerate. None of the states supported them consistently with money or supplies.

In addition, Washington was himself inexperienced as a general and made several tactical mistakes early in the battles for independence that almost ended that conflict. The British were winning big time, 1780-1781. They invaded from the south, taking Savannah, then Portsmouth and Norfolk in the Chesapeake Bay. After a second try, they took Charleston.

By January 1781, they had struck and burned Richmond in a surprise attack. Governor Jefferson and the rest of the Virginia colony government fled back to Charlottesville. By May of 1781, the British took that town too, taking assemblymen captives before they could even leave their desks. Jefferson fled to Monticello, but the British came after him there; he barely escaped capture by five minutes.

The revolutionary war did not look good for the colonies. The Americans were losing everything. We would have lost that revolt had not the French shown up, with 28 ships, 4 frigates, and 3500 troops, for the siege of Yorktown.

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There were two major concepts that kept the American revolutionary soldiers in that army and fighting that war. One was their immense respect for their commander, George Washington. The other was their firm belief that they had God-given rights, for which they had to fight.

The words of Thomas Paine, read to those soldiers while they suffered through the brutal winter at Valley Forge, strengthened their resolve to continue that fight:

***These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot, will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country, but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly: it is dearness only that gives everything its value.***

The other words that moved their souls, and stirred them to continue the fight, in spite of these terrible deprivations, were in that document for the ages, the Declaration of Independence:

***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, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to affect their Safety and Happiness...***

Who would not be stirred by these words? They are poetry in prose, and raise within us the intense feeling that this is right, that all humans have a God-given right to achieve their fulfillment.

These words have that same magical effect on me, too, even though I am aware that many of the concepts on which they are based are primitive. Let's look at them again.

The American Revolution was, in part, a revolution of the wealthy landed gentry of the American colonies, who were angry that they were not getting the same privileges as those who were identified as British subjects. Although the American Revolution would not have occurred without the remarkable incendiary efforts of men like Thomas Paine and Samuel Adams—neither men of significant means—this revolution was greatly agitated by rich white males who wished to be Lords and wished their wives to be Ladies.

Thomas Jefferson was one of those hypocrites. His conceptualization of the Rights of Man espoused in the Declaration did not include women, children, or Black people. Jefferson, although he stated publicly that he thought slavery was an abomination, never freed the people he himself enslaved. The only ones to whom he whom he belatedly granted freedom were the four surviving children of the woman with whom he had those children, Sally Hemings. It was a deal he struck with Sally, and he did not grant these, his own children, their freedom until after his death. He did not give freedom to Sally Hemings; his daughter, Patsy, from his wife, Patty, had to do that, after his death.

All the other human beings he held in bondage were sold in an attempt to pay off part of his debt. At the time of his death, his debt was up to \$2 million (in today's currency terms). Jefferson was a prolific spender, without the income to support his fancy lifestyle. He was able to live that high-flying lifestyle only because he enslaved others who did the work for him. He was unwilling to give up that regal status by freeing slaves. Before we judge Jefferson too harshly, we have to understand that he was a creature of his time, carrying concepts that were normal for his time. Jefferson was a user and abuser at a time in our history when that hypocrisy was considered normal behavior.

Thomas Jefferson did get one thing right: he was adamantly opposed to organized religions, particularly when those religions were tied to governments. He believed that they were a source of deep prejudice, repression, and violence in human societies. Once religions have the power to abuse the public, they have done so throughout human history, giving us the brutality of the Crusades, the Inquisitions, burnings at the stake, hangings, torture, usurpation of private property, abuse of native populations, and priests' abuse of children. Jefferson and our other founding fathers clearly saw that no religion has any business being tied to any government.

Democracy, in particular, cannot survive if tied to a religion. The concept began with John Locke, but it was our founders who gave us that most sacred concept of good government: the separation of church and state.

Jefferson did not believe that humans have no divine rights. He was a deist, believing in a divine creator who gave humans the divine rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Although this concept may be most comforting, and inspire us to perform great deeds, we now know that it is hogwash. All the evidence we have is that the universe runs on chance and probability; it has no concern as to whether we humans live or die, much less whether we have a long and happy life or not. There is no divine being that gives us a right to anything in our lives. None of us humans has any more right to life than a squirrel, a scorpion, a snail, or a Salmonella bacterium.

Also, Jefferson did not understand that humans are most certainly not created equal. In fact, the exact opposite is true. Each of us is a unique individual unlike and unequal to any other individual. In fact, our bodies are programmed to recognize anything that is not exactly like us and attack it as a foreign invader. We would otherwise not survive. Inequality and difference from other living organisms is how we are made, and what keeps us alive.

**We do not possess divine rights, but we sure have equal needs, in order to sustain our place in the greater organism of life.**

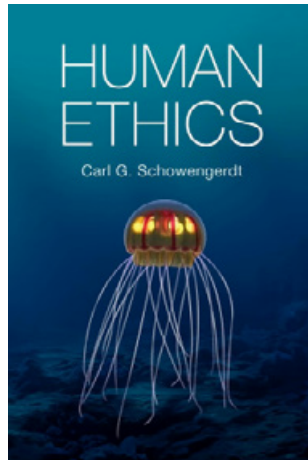
So, what are we left with? If we have no divine rights to Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness, and are not equal, what is left?

Actually, plenty is left. We do not possess divine rights, but we sure have *equal needs*, in order to sustain our place in the greater organism of life. Every human has the need for sustenance, shelter, education, freedom from severe harm, space to grow, loving and being loved. Good governments among humans will provide for those needs. When any government does not provide equal opportunity for its citizens to meet those needs, that government should be overthrown, and replaced with a government that will provide for the fulfillment of its citizens.

We do not, as organisms in an uncaring universe, have divine rights to anything; but we most certainly have equal needs. Each of us should have equal opportunity to meet those needs and achieve our fulfillment in life, **even though we approach those basic needs as unequal individuals.** 📖



# Info



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carl G. Schowengerdt is a retired surgeon who grew up in a family of daily religious and ethical discussions. His father was a Methodist minister, his brother a Methodist bishop. Schowengerdt instead studied medicine, became a physician, and practiced surgery for 40 years, specializing in lung and esophageal cancer, as well as family practice. He chaired the Ethics Committee for Genesis Health Systems, was medical director of the Genesis/James cancer unit and Rambo Memorial Respiratory Health Clinic of Muskingam County, and was president of the nonprofit Appalachian Primary Care. His new book is *Human Ethics*.

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