



Focus on Religious Freedom

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Bishop Fulton J. Sheen and the Declaration of Independence

“Religion and the rights of man go hand in hand. The decline of human liberty in the world is in direct ratio with the decline of religion.” -

“Religion and tyranny grow in indirect ratio. That is why those states which are most antireligious, are most antihuman.” -Venerable Fulton Sheen

Archbishop Fulton Sheen’s sainthood cause now proceeds to beatification while America embarks on a year-long observance of the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. Bishop Sheen spoke prophetic insights into our nation’s founding document.

“The Declaration of Independence,” he wrote in 1941, “is also a Declaration of Dependence... dependence on God and dependence on law as derived from God.”

“We hold these truths to be self-evident,” he quoted, “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.” “Notice these words: The Creator has endowed men with rights and liberties; men got them from God! In other words, we are dependent on God, and that initial dependence is the foundation of our independence.”

When, instead, “the State or the dictator” is held to be “the creator of rights,” he explained, “then the State or the dictator can dispossess men of their rights.” And “That is why in those countries where God is most denied, man is most tyrannized, and where religion is most persecuted, man is most enslaved.”

In 1940, Sheen also expounded on “the purpose of freedom.” “Liberty is not the right to do whatever I please,” he wrote; “rather liberty is the right to do what I ought.”

“Certainly you *can* do anything” you want to, he wrote. “You can rob your neighbor, you can beat your wife...you can shoot your neighbor’s chickens,” but you *ought* not to do these things because ought implies morality, rights, and duties. “Freedom,” he emphasized, “is a moral power rather than a physical power, an ‘ought’ instead of a ‘can.’”

Sheen concluded about the role of religion in a democracy: “Religion’s service to democracy is secondary and indirect; that is, by concentrating on spiritualizing the souls of men, it will diffuse through political society an increased service of justice and charity rooted in God.”