



Respect: The Bridge Between Natural Rights and a Free Society

A society cannot be strong if its people are not strong. A society cannot be successful if its people are not successful. Likewise, in order for a free society to remain free, its people must understand the rights and values behind their freedom. Therefore, it is essential in the building of a free society that natural rights and respect, two tenets of significant importance, are understood and practiced, because without them, a free society cannot be maintained.

In order to understand why that is the case, it is necessary to understand what a free society constitutes. At its core, a free society is one in which its people are not restricted in exercising their given freedoms. These freedoms include the ones many Americans hold dear to themselves and their nation—such as the freedom of speech, religion, petition, and press—but also the freedom to move and transport oneself and one's belongings without restriction. According to the Steve Forbes in the journal *Policy Review*, these freedoms are not “commod- it[ies]...nor...moral, spiritual, or political vacuum[s] in which anything goes,” but “priceless treasure[s].” As a result of the formal granting of these freedoms, more opportunities for more people arise, and a free society becomes one that “offers individuals and families equal opportunity to better their lives morally, spiritually, intellectually, and economically” (Forbes). In theory, and in the minds of many Americans, the government safeguards these freedoms and opportunities (Kinnard and Swanson). In reality, however, the story is not so simple.

The truth is, the government alone is not responsible for building and maintaining a free society. It is in fact a joint effort with the people of said society. The people have just as much authority as the state when it comes to protecting theirs and each other's freedoms. A major component of this authority is the responsibility of the citizenry to understand their natural rights, and respect the natural rights of their fellow citizens. Then and only then can a free society with a strong, lasting foundation be built.



To grasp the connection between a public understanding of natural rights and respect, and the building of a free society, the difference between natural rights and legal rights must be discerned. Legal rights are defined as the rights explicitly defined in a written law code—if the law changes, what rights are bestowed upon the people may change as well. Natural rights, on the other hand, cannot be denied to people with the stroke of a pen; they are “universal and inalienable” rights, and they cannot be repealed (Longley). The concept of natural rights was one understood by Americans nearly two and a half centuries ago when the citizens of Fairfax County adopted their infamous Fairfax Resolves, proclaiming that their rights belonged to them “by the laws of nature” (Antieau). Since then, an understanding of natural rights has only increased in importance.

Natural rights and the quality of respect go hand in hand; one can not exist without the other. Citizens of a free society must respect their fellow citizens’ natural rights, even if they may disagree with how those rights are being used. Perhaps it can best be summarized with a quote often attributed to Voltaire: “I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.”

When natural rights are understood, and respect is practiced, a free society can be built and maintained. A likely question, however, is how? It may not be particularly difficult to understand one’s natural rights, and to extend respect to one’s fellow man, but how do these two qualities assist in the building of a free society? It is because when the citizenry understands their natural rights, they can effectively protect themselves from forces attempting to spoil their free society. And when the citizenry is respectful of their fellow citizens and their rights, they can effectively protect others from forces attempting to spoil their free society.

Simply put, an informed and respectful society is a free society. After all, as Sicinius, a character in Shakespeare’s tragedy *Coriolanus*, puts it, “What is the city but its people?”



Works Cited

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