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# *Created Equal*

*Exclusion and Inclusion  
in the American Dream*



*Essays on Deepening the American Dream*

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## CREATED EQUAL

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### EXCLUSION AND INCLUSION IN THE AMERICAN DREAM

*Elaine H. Pagels*

WHEN I REFLECT on the American dream, the first words that come to mind are these: “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 . . .” We know that these statements expressed a vision, for certainly this was not the waking reality of those who wrote and signed the Declaration of Independence—some, of course, like Thomas Jefferson, were themselves slave owners living in a colony ruled by British monarchs. How, then, could they declare that human equality is “self-evident”? Anything *self-evident* should be obvious through simple observation; yet empirically minded observers, from ancient times to the present, often have deduced the opposite. Certainly Aristotle, the most empirically minded of ancient philosophers, inferred from his own observation that nothing was more self-evident than innate difference. As he saw it, among humans, as among every litter of lion kits, puppies, and baby chickens, those endowed with superior strength, speed, and intelligence naturally dominate those born weaker. Wherever Aristotle would have looked, from the forum where those ruling the city debated policy to his own household, with segregated and smaller quarters for women and children, or in the kitchens and the fields where hierarchies of slaves labored to clean the house and prepare dinner for their owners, he could find verification for his conviction that such a social order is natural and essential. Two and a half millennia later, any of Jefferson’s contemporaries, walking through his estate at Monticello, might easily have come to the same conclusion.

Many historians have wanted to claim that the Christian movement changed all that—changed, for example, the status of slaves from that of

property, with no capacity to engage in legal proceedings of any kind, whether marriage, divorce, ownership, court testimony, or inheritance, to the status of human being. Yet this was not the case. We have noted already that many who signed the Declaration, themselves raised as Christians, took for granted that slaves (and perhaps non-Caucasians as well) were not included among those “created equal” (although some had had qualms about the question). Most, of course, would have excluded women as well, whatever their race or class. Even into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many still agreed with Aristotle that the particular virtue (literally, “excellence”) of the male master is to rule, just as the appropriate response of those who were, in various ways, their subjects—women, slaves, and children—is to obey.

If human equality is by no means *self-evident*, what about the claim that all human beings “are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights”? Advocates of human rights have often wanted to claim this as an innate and universal idea, and some have made extravagant claims for nonexistent precedents. The book prepared for World Law Day, for example, says: “The idea of the inalienable rights of the human being was often articulated by poets, philosophers, and politicians in antiquity.”<sup>1</sup> This grandiose—and, I suspect, intentionally vague—statement is followed by a single specific example: When Antigone, in Sophocles’ play bearing her name, written in 422 B.C., says to King Creon, “All your strength is weakness itself against the immortal, unrecorded laws of God,” she invokes the higher law, the natural rights of man.

One might add—just as anachronistically—that she also speaks for the rights of *women*. But what Sophocles actually invokes in *Antigone* has nothing to do with any kind of “natural rights of man”; instead, the “higher law” Antigone invokes is *divine*—the law of the gods—and concerns *blood loyalty among family members*—in this case, their duty to bury their dead. Nothing Sophocles says involves any idea of a universal natural law, much less of human rights.

Some people have suggested that the idea of human rights can be traced back to the ancient law code of Babylonia, instituted around three thousand years ago by the famous lawgiver Hammurabi. Those who make this claim point out that the legislation attributed to Hammurabi specifies certain legal protections against mutilation and torture. What they fail to point out, however, is that these exemptions applied only to aristocrats; the law code not only allows but assumes that mutilation and torture would be routinely applied to lower-class people and slaves. Any “rights”—or, more accurately, privileges—conferred by Hammurabi’s code not only depended on social status but were also derived entirely

from society (their authors would probably have said from the gods) and not from any quality intrinsic to any individual.

The same was true in Rome, where, as in the ancient Near East, the emperor ruled as the son of the gods and against whose will there was no recourse—except, of course, assassination. Only Roman citizens, a small percentage of the population, had specific rights, and these were minimal indeed: citizenship protected a person from torture and being condemned without a trial—commonplace events for slaves and other noncitizens. Furthermore, if condemned to death, the citizen had the privilege of being privately beheaded, rather than publicly tortured and killed in the arena, as noncitizens were. This legal system, too, is based on the premise that rights are conferred—or withheld—by the state.

But if the idea of human rights is rare and late, historically and geographically speaking, its opposite is virtually universal—namely, the idea that *society confers on its members whatever rights, privileges, or exemptions they enjoy*. Traditional societies take for granted that the sociopolitical order reflects a universal, inviolable divine order, from which all value derives. The laws of the Hebrew Bible make similar claims for their laws and later for their rulers; Muslim society would follow a similar pattern. Such leaders, therefore, rule by divine right: they can make claims on any member of the society, but no ordinary individual has any claim on *them*, since social and political hierarchy, along with whatever rights it conveys—or withholds—also are rooted in the divine order.

Nor was this pattern of deriving rights from society culture-bound—bound, that is, to Western culture. On the contrary, it has prevailed in non-Western countries as well. Among the tribes of Australia, Africa, and North and South America, tribal hierarchy and custom are understood to be sanctioned by the divine order, or by nature. A similar pattern has prevailed for centuries in Hindu societies of India, Cambodia, Nepal, and Pakistan: the social and political order reflects the divine order, which the ruler embodies. The caste system, endorsed as the reflection of that order, fixed the ranks of society into the three upper classes, defined by their respective privileges; the fourth class consisted of people to whom were allotted minimum rights, and below these were the “untouchables,” who remained outside any system of rights. The social orders that prevailed for centuries in China, Japan, Korea, Mongolia, Burma, and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) similarly revered the ruler as the embodiment of divine order and allowed no recourse for what we call “the individual.” To this list we may add Marxist societies, which inverted the religious pattern and claimed that the social order reflects inviolable natural laws analogous to the laws of biology and physics. Yet here again, value resides in the social

order: only as one contributes to the community can one derive benefits from it.

In Western history as well, of course, this pattern is not just ancient history but the form of political theory that has dominated Christian Europe since the fourth century. One's social position, whether serf or aristocrat, was understood to be arranged according to God's will. Serfdom, and later slavery, as well as the negligible legal situation of women, were sanctioned in the same way, as was the persecution of Jews and Muslims. The Holy Roman Emperor and the Catholic and Protestant rulers of Europe all claimed to rule by divine right.

More accurate than any sweeping claims for the antiquity and universality of human rights, then, is Condorcet's observation that "the notion of human rights was absent from the legal conceptions of the Romans and Greeks; this seems to hold equally of the Jewish, Chinese, and all other ancient civilizations that have since come to light. The domination of this ideal has been the exception rather than the rule, even in the recent history of the West."<sup>2</sup> What the Declaration of Independence proclaimed in 1776, then, was something relatively—and radically—new: the conviction that the individual has intrinsic rights, claims on society and even *against* society, which any state, in order to be legitimate, must recognize and is obliged to protect. Thomas Jefferson and his bold contemporaries were, of course, well aware how radical their Declaration was—in fact, of course, they aimed it directly against the claims to divine right by King George III, whose royal descendants to this day claim as their family motto "Dieu et Mon Droit" ("God and My Right").

Where, then, did we get the idea that supports this central theme of the American dream—the idea that ultimate value resides in the human person, independent from—even prior to—participation in any social or political collective? What could possibly have made its statements sound "self-evident" to its authors, much less to their hearers? The language in which they wrote offers clues: "that all men *are created* equal" and "that they are *endowed by their Creator* with certain unalienable Rights." Far from being inferences drawn from observation, much less facts, these are statements of faith—drawn directly from the creation account of Genesis 1, which tells how God made *adam*—in Hebrew, humankind—in his own image and endowed humankind with his own power to rule over the earth in God's place. The story proclaims, then, the religious conviction that even before the construction of any society, the original human, fresh from God's hands, so to speak, bore intrinsic and sacred value.

Yet American revolutionaries were by no means the first to find political as well as religious meaning in this ancient story. Probably written

down about three thousand years ago, this story had been told and retold by Israelite storytellers for perhaps hundreds of years before that. These people, whose ancestors had lived as nomads and settlers at the margins of the great agrarian empires of the ancient Near East, no doubt told this story to challenge, among other things, the prevailing political ideology of the ancient theocracies among which they lived. Tellers of this story had in mind, no doubt, the experience of Israelites forcibly deported to Babylonia, who had heard and seen in the great public festivals celebrated in Babylonia every New Year—that the sun god Marduk, having vanquished all other gods so that now he ruled them all, had delegated his power *over the whole earth* to the king of Babylonia, who embodied that power to rule over human society. Similarly, Israelites who had lived in Egypt would have heard how the sun god, in Egypt worshipped as Ra, had bestowed his power on the pharaoh; and many would have seen in splendid and solemn processions through the streets of Karnak and Alexandria how the pharaoh, clothed as Ra in brilliant regalia, bore the signs of divine sovereignty and ruled as Ra's living image on earth. Thus the political ideology—and the theatrical pageantry—of ancient empires presented each of the actual rulers, bearing the scepter and crowns belonging to gods, in the image of the god whose power each embodied.

When Israelite storytellers insisted, then, that on the contrary, their god had actually *created* the sun—which was, they declared, *not* a god at all but simply a “big light” their god had set in the sky to regulate the daytime, they were challenging Babylonian and Egyptian theology—and the political theory with which it was inextricably involved. And when they went on to say that their god, to crown his creation, had finally created *adam*—humankind—and commanded *him* to “rule the earth, and subdue it,” they, no less than Thomas Jefferson, were effectively declaring their own independence from foreign claims of divine kingship. For, we recall, the story tells how God created Adam “in his image and likeness”—not like the monumental stone or bronze statues of Marduk or Ra, as Babylonian and Egyptian rulers were depicted, but as a living, breathing manifestation of God on earth, and solemnly invested him with “dominion over the earth.” Thus the story shows, in effect, that “*any one of our men bears the image of our god and so is equal to your king*—indeed, is greater than your king; for both you and your king foolishly worship the sun, which is only a lamp made by our god to serve humanity!”

Thus as Thomas Jefferson intuitively understood, the Genesis creation story not only interprets human nature but also bears direct implications for human society and politics. Even thousands of years ago, many who

heard this creation story went on to ask what it meant. If Israel's God forbade his people to make images of him, what can it mean to say that Adam was made "in his image"? Some storytellers suggested that *adam* was created in the image of the divine light that appeared in that moment before creation, when God spoke into vast darkness, as "a wind (or spirit) from God swept over the deep waters" (Genesis 1:2) and commanded, "Let there be light!" This was no ordinary light, since the world had not yet come into being; rather, this light was a form of divine energy. Those who read the oracles of the prophets Isaiah and Daniel, who wrote that they had glimpsed God in heaven, dazzling with light, suggested that what appeared in the primordial light was "a human being, very marvelous," a being of radiant light, shining like a thousand suns—shining like God himself. Some suggested that this primordial Adam shone with the radiance of the divine light and that perhaps it was he whose presence awed the prophets, including Ezekiel, when he was brought up into heaven in a chariot of fire to glimpse God's throne. For Ezekiel says he saw on that throne one who looked "like a human form," flashing with the radiance of fire and rainbows, and "a splendor all around . . . the glory of the Lord." This glorious image, who appears to be somehow both divine and human, later became central to Jewish mysticism, and is often called the "light Adam," who reflects the glory of God himself. Kabbalistic teaching suggests that this divine light is the energy from which the entire universe came forth and which still shines, although often hidden and unknown, within everyone.

We may recognize this as a kind of dream image that has come from Midrashic tradition centuries old, which suggests that our mythical ancestor—and so, by implication, we ourselves—have come, as Wordsworth says, "trailing clouds of glory do we come from God, who is our home."<sup>3</sup> (In Wordsworth's use of "glory," he echoes the Hebrew term *kabod* for God's appearance that connotes "shining light, radiance.") This vision of divine light as a secret link between God and humankind is what inspired George Fox, who founded the Quaker movement, to proclaim that the "inner light" shines in everyone—even, as he took care to point out, in the illiterate, the Delaware Indian, the African enslaved in Virginia—and energized his "Society of Friends" to work to abolish slavery and war. William Blake, who learned of this tradition from Kabbalistic groups in London, embodied it in his poems and paintings.

But every dream, of course, is susceptible to different interpretations. In the case of the dream that inspired the founding of the United States, an essential question is, *Who is included?* That is, when we speak of "our people," whom do we actually have in mind?



Answering this question is no simpler today than it was at the time of the American Revolution. Then as now, some people (and, of course, some politicians) see “all men” (potentially, at least) as representing *everyone*; others do not. From the time the creation story was first told, in fact, this question has proved explosively controversial. Over a thousand years ago, some rabbis argued that the vision of Adam represents everyone, for, they pointed out, the Hebrew term *adam*, though often taken to be the proper name it later became, originally was a generic term that simply meant “humankind.” But others—more often the majority—declared instead that Adam, being the original, ideal human being, must have been the very best of his species, which can only mean, many believed, *people like ourselves*. Thus in ancient times, a majority of rabbis agreed that Adam must have been a *freeborn Jewish male*. And while a dissenting minority suggested that women *married* to such freeborn Jewish men might *also* share, by association, in Adam’s glory, even these more liberal rabbis assumed that Adam’s prerogatives would not apply to any *other* women—much less to slaves or Gentiles. Within the varied writings included in the Jewish Bible, some passages seem to express a universal vision and others a sectarian one. While certain passages, including some oracles of the prophet Isaiah, for example, envision God’s blessing finally coming upon all humankind, upon “all nations of the earth,” many others suggest that God, having given up on the human race as a whole, now has chosen to bless Israel alone.

Since the idea of Israel’s exclusive election could hardly appeal to many Gentiles, it is no surprise that the first widely successful version of Jewish teaching aimed at non-Jews—the teaching of Paul, who saw himself as the missionary of “Jesus the Christ (Messiah) to the Gentiles”—proclaimed a much more inclusive message. Although Paul himself had been educated among rabbis to believe that he, being a free Jewish male, was gifted with divine prerogatives above all slaves, Gentiles, and women, he declared that now he had come to see Jesus as nothing less than a “new Adam”—the prototype of a new and transformed human race. “In Christ,” he declared, membership in God’s people is no longer restricted by gender, class, or even ethnicity, for “in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, man nor woman; but all are one in Christ Jesus.” This phrase is not original with Paul; in fact, he had probably heard these same words pronounced over his *own* head when he was initiated into the group of Jesus’ followers. Thereafter, when he and his fellow missionaries baptized others, they solemnly pronounced this formula over the heads of new members of their small—and marginal—groups of converts.

Those attracted to this message—and, no doubt, especially the slaves, women, and Gentiles among them—took this to be very *good news* indeed (which is what the term *gospel* originally means). One of our early “gospels” about Jesus, the Gospel of Thomas, depicts Jesus, rather as Paul did, as one who speaks as a voice from the primordial light—the divine energy that brought the universe into being, like the radiant “light Adam” called into being even before the creation of the universe. But the Gospel of Thomas takes the tendency toward inclusiveness further than Paul and depicts Jesus telling his disciples that because they, too, come from the same divine source as he himself, they may therefore find the same divine light within themselves as well as in him. So, he says, “If [people] say to you, ‘Where do you come from?’ say, ‘We come from the light; the place where the light came into being through its own power.’ And if they say to you, ‘Who are you?’ say, ‘We are children (of the light), the chosen of the living Father.’” Thus this gospel teaches that the “good news”—the gospel—is that every one of us can discover that divine light within ourselves, since we all come from the same divine source. However, as Buddhists also taught, many people remain unaware of their relationship to the divine Source and so live “in darkness” or, as Jesus here interprets it, “in poverty—and you *are* that poverty.”

The Gospel of Thomas takes Jesus’ teaching even further: here “the living Jesus” goes on to say that this divine energy that infuses him also pervades *all things that exist*—not only all human beings but everything in the universe, from the sun and stars even to logs and rocks. Thus, according to this gospel, Jesus says:

I am the light that is before all things;  
 I am all things; all things came forth from me; all things ascend to me.  
 Split a piece of wood, and I am there;  
 Lift up a rock, and you will find me there.

Although some scholars have read Thomas as an elitist tradition, which, like certain Buddhist teachings, speaks primarily to the few who seek enlightenment, in ancient times such a tradition, like Buddhism, was often understood as recognizing all people—potentially, at least—as capable of attaining it.

Strikingly, a related story in the Syrian *Acts of Thomas* shows that some Christians who followed such teaching not only proclaimed human equality as a matter of religious conviction but also insisted that it be put into *practice*. The anonymous author of the *Acts of Thomas* reports, for example, that when the Apostle Thomas was preaching the gospel in a crowded

marketplace in India, Mygdonia, the wife of one the king's relatives, was so eager to see the apostle that she ordered the slaves bearing her litter to press their way through the enormous throng. When they failed to make headway, she sent a slave home to bring back a posse of her household slaves, who came on the run to force the crowd to give way to their mistress, hitting and beating those who stood in her way. But when Thomas saw this, the apostle challenged and rebuked her: "Why do you trample on those who come to hear the word? For [Jesus said] to the crowd who came to hear him, '*Come to me, you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*'" At this point, Thomas pointedly ignored Mygdonia and turned instead to address the slaves bearing her litter:

*This blessing . . . is now for you, who are "heavy laden." For it is you who bear burdens hard to bear, and you are driven at her command. And although you are human, they place burdens on you as if you were irrational animals, and those who have authority over you think that you are not humans like themselves. And they do not know that all are alike before God, whether slaves or free.*

Our evidence shows, moreover, that some women converts similarly drew practical conclusions about gender equality from Christian teaching. *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, a story widely told and loved in the ancient world, tells of the young Thecla, who, having heard Paul preach, eagerly accepted his teaching, abruptly refused to marry her fiancé, and abandoned her widowed mother in order to follow Paul. After a man tried to rape the solitary young traveler, she cut off her hair, put on men's clothes, and confronted overwhelming obstacles—even obstacles raised by Paul himself. For the *Acts* says that Paul, shocked by Thecla's unconventional behavior, refused to baptize her, lest he encourage, much less endorse, what she was doing. This account, embroidered with legend but based on a true story, ends only after Thecla, refused baptism by Paul, baptizes herself and becomes a renowned and revered holy woman and healer, revered to this day as a saint among Eastern Orthodox Christians.

Yet most of us familiar with the Christianity of the New Testament have never even heard of *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* and the Gospel of Thomas—or of other writings like them. When I began to ask why Christian leaders did not include such writings within the canonical collections they called the "New Testament" or the "apostolic fathers" of the church, I began to wonder whether some Christians set aside these writings because they rejected the radical—and practical—conclusions to which such teachings might lead. We know, after all, that even Paul himself, soon

after he began to preach that “in Christ there is neither man nor woman, slave nor free, Jew nor Gentile,” discovered—apparently to his distress and chagrin—that certain converts had taken him to mean that they thought was his word: some slaves and women took him to mean that they were now equal to their masters and husbands. Realizing this, Paul decided to write the letter we call 1 Corinthians, in which he explains to Christian slaves and women that despite their equality “in Christ,” for the duration of the present world (which Paul thought would be short), and for all practical purposes, wives must remain subject to their husbands and slaves to their owners.

Furthermore, Christian leaders of the second and third century, who realized how popular and authoritative Paul’s letters were for many believers, took care, when they began to assemble the collection that we call the New Testament, to add to Paul’s authentic letters a *second* group of letters *attributed* to Paul but actually written by others—the so-called deuterio-Pauline letters, which to this day most Christians accept as if they actually had been written by Paul. These deuterio-Pauline letters not only address virtually all the practical questions raised among Christian groups during the earliest communities but also, in every case, emphasize the most *conservative* elements in Paul’s teaching. The deuterio-Pauline letter to Timothy, for example, has “Paul” reinforce and intensify women’s subjugation to men, as its anonymous author declares that

a woman must learn in silence, with complete submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to remain silent. For Adam was formed first, not Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived, and became a sinner. Yet woman will be saved through childbearing, if she continues in faith and love and holiness, with complete modesty. (1 Timothy 2:11–15)

While Paul, in his authentic letters, advises widows and other single women to “remain single, as I do,” adding that this is not a divine command but only his opinion (1 Corinthians 7:25), the pseudo-Paul of the letter of Timothy, on the contrary, tells single women to marry and bear children and urges them to occupy themselves exclusively with household obligations (1 Timothy 5:4, 14).

Furthermore, the same letter (and others like it) has “Paul” strongly insist that Christian slaves are not to imagine that they are now equal to their masters “in the world.” On the contrary, they are to realize that for the duration of this world, they must remain in subjection:

Let all who are under the yoke of slavery regard their masters as worthy of all honor. . . . Those who have masters who are believers must not be disrespectful on the ground that they are “brothers,” but rather they must serve all the more. (1 Timothy 6:1)

Another pseudo-Pauline letter has the apostle order slaves to “obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as [you obey] Christ” (Ephesians 6:5).

Because the compilers who shaped the final structure of the New Testament canon placed the deuterio-Pauline letters along with the authentic ones, generations of Christians for two millennia have taken “Paul” to be saying that although women, slaves, and Gentiles may, through baptism, become “one in Christ” with men, with their masters, and with Jews, such equality “before God,” so to speak, has nothing to do with present social and political reality. Since virtually all Christians, for over two thousand years, have assumed that *all* of the letters that bear his name are genuine letters of Paul, such decisions have profoundly shaped Christian tradition as we know it.

At the same time, the canon of the New Testament also excluded, for example, the Gospel of Thomas, with its teaching of the divine light hidden within all humankind. Instead, Christian leaders included the Gospel of John, which depicts only the small group of Jesus’ followers as God’s beloved, ranged against a vast, hostile mass of outsiders on whom will fall God’s wrath. Although the process of compiling this collection has left few records, we can trace the influence of certain church leaders like Irenaeus of Lyons in the second century and Athanasius of Alexandria in the fourth, who wrote down the first known list of the twenty-seven writings they declared divinely inspired. Both bishops championed the Gospel of John, which rejected the universal vision of “divine light” found in the Gospel of Thomas and replaced it with a sectarian one.

We have seen, too, that the authors of *both* of these gospels, Thomas and John, no less than Thomas Jefferson, were interpreting the same Genesis creation story—Thomas interpreting it *inclusively* and John *exclusively*. For while the Gospel of John agrees with Thomas that the divine light called forth “in the beginning” is manifest on earth, it declares that this light is not to be found—even potentially—in all people but only in one *particular* human being. John declares that Jesus of Nazareth, whom he believes to be God incarnate, alone embodies “the true light that comes into the world” (John 1:5), and John pictures Jesus saying, “I am the light of the world” (John 8:22).

When John wrote this gospel, about forty years after Jesus' death, he wrote it to show that the few who, along with himself, believe in Jesus—and they alone—share in God's light, but all who do not believe are “sons of darkness,” already divinely condemned to hell. Written in the first century by a member of a persecuted sectarian group, John's gospel has been loved throughout the centuries—and still is—by groups of Christians who see themselves as the few who are “God's own” in a dark and hostile world.

By the time the collection of writings we call the New Testament was compiled, then, Christians were tending toward their *own* form of sectarianism, suggesting, for example, that the divine light *no longer* dwells in Jews—much less in pagans—but only in those who follow Jesus. Thus many Christians now proclaim that they alone (and, many would increasingly emphasize, only certain *kinds* of Christians) are the *only* people whom God favors. This tendency toward exclusion may surprise people who assume that religious language—generically speaking—is benign, inclusive, and unifying. But when we actually investigate a wide range of religious traditions, we often find the opposite. More often than not, in virtually all cultures, religion has served to sanction the claims of one's own people, tribe, or nation—often above, and usually *against*, any perceived as “others.”

When Israel's traditions came to be adopted by people of many cultures in many parts of the world and read in thousands of languages, innumerable people interpreted its blessings and promises to apply to themselves—none more consequentially than those who came to America. Recall, for example, how the Puritans who read the story of God's promises to Abraham cast themselves in the role of a “new Israel” to whom God had given this continent as their own Promised Land. In God's command to Abraham to purify the land of Canaan by killing all its previous inhabitants, many Calvinist Christians found their own divine commission to purify America by destroying its previous inhabitants, who were, they believed, pagan savages. At the same time, however, in the early seventeenth century, the radical Christian George Fox received visions that impelled him to reject both catholic and “protesting” Christianity and proclaim a different message. Fox founded the Society of Friends, more often called the Quakers, a “society” based on the conviction that since every human being comes forth from God, each one has the “inner light” within. Fox fearlessly preached his message from one British town to another and from settlements in the American colonies from Massachusetts to the Carolinas, seeking to demonstrate that divine light shines within every person, from every British peasant to the king himself, from every African

slave to members of Dakota tribes, whether educated or illiterate, male or female. Repeatedly imprisoned, beaten, attacked, and threatened with death, Fox traveled on both sides of the Atlantic, tirelessly proclaiming the “inner light” and urging anyone who would listen to work to abolish slavery and war. Some three hundred years later, Martin Luther King Jr., in his famous “I Have a Dream” speech, read the biblical promises of a new land as a vision of America healed from racial hatred and transformed by justice and righteousness.

We recognize, then, the “American dream” expressed in the eloquent words of the Declaration of Independence, for what it is—a religious vision inspired by the Genesis creation story. Our history reminds us, however, that we cannot take dreams at face value. From the story of Daniel interpreting the dreams of the king of Babylonia to the writings of Sigmund Freud and his successors, we have learned how elusive dreams can be and how they lend themselves to many possible interpretations. What, then, do we make of this dream in waking reality? How shall we take this vision to shape our sense of who we are—as a people, a nation, a community?

Today, especially as we hear religious rhetoric increasingly invoked in public, we need to know—and take responsibility for—the ways we interpret the dream expressed in our Declaration. More than ever we need to ask, Whom do we include in the “American dream”? We hear many, most of them Christians, who claim the right to declare themselves, or specific groups they have in mind—groups often defined through religious affiliation, race, ethnicity, economic or legal status, or even sexual orientation—as the true heirs of America’s legacy. We have even heard our Christian legacy invoked for the purpose of waging religious war.

We cannot, then, take for granted an inclusive understanding of the American dream. On the contrary, maintaining one requires us to contend against a natural human preference to associate with “people like ourselves”—a tendency that, when embodied in our politics, often leads people, consciously or not, to carve out exclusive groups and set them against others—a tendency certainly as alive today as it has ever been. Anyone who glances at the front page of the newspaper can see that claims of exclusive loyalty to one’s own blood relatives, to one’s clan, tribe, or coreligionists—loyalty allegedly endorsed by divine sanction—still stirs the passion of millions of people throughout the world and explodes into deadly conflict throughout the world, from Serbia to Palestine, from Rwanda to Uzbekistan, from Kashmir, Egypt, and Israel to Newark and Buenos Aires.

Yet we can also see how many people, not only in this country but throughout the world, share a vision of human equality, of the intrinsic value of each person “in the eyes of God.” Utopian as this may sound in the tumultuous world we inhabit today, it must have seemed much more so to the men who wrote out the drafts of that Declaration, aware that they were taking irreversible steps to instigate a revolution that required them to risk everything on the stifling heat of that July day in 1776 when they signed it, “pledging our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.” As we recall what they bequeathed to us at such cost, let us deepen our understanding of the “American dream” and commit ourselves to extend it to all people worldwide who would share in its promises, blessings, and responsibilities.

## NOTES

- 1 World Peace Through Law Center, *International Legal Protections for Human Rights* (Washington, D.C.: World Peace Through Law Center, 1977), p. 17. Published for World Law Day, Aug. 21, 1977.
- 2 Cited in Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” in *Four Essays on Liberty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 169.
- 3 William Wordsworth, “Ode,” *Intimations of Immortality*, ll. 65–66.