**Human Equality and Individual Freedom**

The following is adapted from a speech delivered on September 16, 2008, at a Hillsdale College National Leadership Seminar in Colorado Springs by Dinesh D'Souza.

     When Thomas Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal," he called the proposition "self-evident."  But he did not mean that it is immediately evident.  It requires a certain kind of learning.  And indeed most cultures throughout history, and even today, reflect the proposition.  At first glance, there is admittedly something absurd about the claim of human equality, when all around us we see dramatic evidence of inequality.  People are unequal in height, in weight, in strength, in stamina, in intelligence, in perseverance, in truthfulness, and in about every other quality.  But of course Jefferson knew this.  He was asserting human equality of a special kind.  Human beings, he was saying, are moral equals, each of whom possesses certain equal rights.  They differ in many respects, but each of their lives has a moral worth no greater and no less than that of any other.  According to this doctrine, the rights of a Philadelphia street sweeper are the same as those of Jefferson himself.
     This idea of the preciousness and equal worth of every human being is largely rooted in Christianity.  Christians believe that God places infinite value on every human life.  Christian salvation does not attach itself to a person's family or tribe or city.  It is an individual matter.  And not only are Christians judged at the end of their lives as individuals, but throughout their lives they relate to God on that basis.  This aspect of Christianity had momentous consequences.

A New Morality
     In ancient Greece and Rome, individual human life had no particular value in and of itself.  The Spartans left weak children to die on the hillside.  Infanticide was common, as it is common even today in many parts of the world.  Fathers who wanted sons had few qualms about drowning their newborn daughters.  Human beings were routinely bludgeoned to death or mauled by wild animals in the Roman gladiatorial arena.  Many of the great classical thinkers saw nothing wrong with these practices.  Christianity, on the other hand, contributed to their demise by fostering moral outrage at the mistreatment of innocent human life.

Freedom Redefined
     Christianity has also lent force to the modern concept of individual freedom.  This is because the modern idea of freedom is rooted in a respect for the individual.  It means the right to express our opinion, the right to choose a career, the right to buy and sell property, the right to travel where we want, the right to our own personal space, and the right to live our own life.  In return, we are responsible only to respect the rights of others.  This is the freedom we are ready to fight for, and we become indignant when it is challenged or taken away.
     Christianity has played a vital role in the development of this new concept of freedom through its doctrine that all human beings are moral agents, created in God's image, with the ability to be the architects of their own lives.
     One of Western civilization's greatest atheists, the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche said:  The ideas that define Western civilization are based on Christianity.  Remove Christianity and the ideas fall too.