

ORIGINS

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Towards a Charter of Responsibilities

*No man is an Iland, intire of it selfe;
Every man is a peece of the Conti-
nent,
a part of the maine;
If a Clod bee washed away by the
Sea,
Europe is the lesse,
as well as if a Promontorie were,
as well as if a mannor of they
friends or of thine owne were;
Any mans death diminishes me,
because I am involved in Mankinde;
And therefore never send to know
for whom the bell tolls;
It tolls for thee.*

It is unlikely when John Donne wrote these verses at the turn of the 17th century, that he could have known his words would one day serve as the foundation for a critique of the twentieth century world. Yet, Donne's sentiments remain as valid today as when they were written.

Donne's emphasis on the organic connections and ties binding all humans points to the question of rights versus responsibilities in society. Since the end of the eighteenth century, Western politics and culture have been predicated on the rights of the individual. Those rights are documented and delineated through constitutions. They are protected by systems of law. They are endowed by a collective ethos that places individual rights among our most cherished and protected values.

While the men of those times needed to defend themselves against the power of feudal and aristocratic privilege, their emphasis on individual rights has carried over into our times. Such affirmation of the rights of society's members is still absolutely, gravely necessary. However, this singular focus on the rights of the individual has been to the exclusion of societal responsibility.

In the Western world, huge expectations (and sometimes demands) of what one deserves and should receive from society (what is yours "by right") have grown up around the idea of the protection

of individual rights and those of specific societal groups. But, these expectations come without the simultaneous prospect that one needs to give something back—that in order to receive the benefits, one must accept the responsibility to give. And this unbalanced focus on rights has left us with a common psyche that is damaging. Garbage, for instance, is left on the street because it is not on "my" property.

To strive for a society that is harmonious, we must include responsibility into the equation. We have the right to free speech, but we have no concomitant responsibility to use it properly. Certainly we have laws that tell us what we cannot do. But these are constructed for the protection of rights and are almost always in the negative: you cannot do this.

Responsibilities are not like laws. They are agreements to act in a certain way. They also reflect certain realizations: that the life of a society must balance rights with responsibilities if we are to fulfill our greatest societal potential; that life is a trade off, for every right we receive, the good functioning of the society requires that we also formally accept a responsibility; that we cannot think only of ourselves, but must realize our connections to, and our role in, the larger whole.

This is not to deny the sanctity and undeniable necessity of individual rights. It would be a dark world without them. But, is it not time that we began to draw up a Charter of Responsibilities to balance our Charter of Rights?



Origins welcomes your comments. Please direct your letters to:

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