

Tradition!

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In Fiddler on the Roof, Tevya, the milkman, a poor Jewish villager trying to survive in Tzarist Russia, is faced by societal changes that he resists with all his might. Tradition is his shield and protection from what he sees as chaos.

Of course, there are limits to how much one can resist the present. Around the world, and even in our own country, there are people who resist the present, or, rather, resist some of the changes of the present. They cherry pick.

The entire Muslim world, from those whose religion weighs lightly on them (Indonesia) to those whose every waking moment is enmeshed in tradition (Saudi Arabia), are cherry picking those aspects of tradition that they will not surrender. It is fine to have the benefits of western science (automobiles, airplanes, hospitals, cell phones, air conditioning, and television), all of which certainly improve life's comforts. Camels are now carried around in Arabia in pickup trucks; disease is no longer treated by melting the ink from a page of the Koran and drinking it; and air conditioning is a great improvement over slaves waving fans.

The one tradition that still has a grip on much of the world is that women are property, second class, or good only for breeding. The Muslim world is not alone in clinging fanatically to this tradition; almost all believers in the fundamental truth of traditional religions feel the same way. This is where the line is drawn on challenging tradition. Women are still the hot button issue for change resisters.

I confess to adhering to one aspect of tradition: festive food traditions that come down to us from many of our ancestors. Food traditions exist in the modern world to celebrate holidays and important events in family and community lives. Nobody is forced to eat those foods. Nobody is forced to cook such foods. It is a purely voluntary and joyful connection to those who came before us.

But I have difficulty in understanding the mindset of religious or political traditionalists: the belief that their distant ancestors knew more than they themselves do. This assumes that these ancestors were all-wise, knew best how human beings should behave, and must not be disobeyed.

All major religions have their roots in the distant past, a past in which there was no knowledge of such modern amenities as electricity, which replaced slaves or horses as major sources of power. They knew nothing of safe drinking water and sewage systems, surgery from which patients survived, brain science which explains more about madness and criminality than belief in demons, or contraception that frees women to pursue all their gifts, not just childbearing.

In the political realm, I disagree with the "originalists" who insist that we today must try to fathom the intentions of our very wise Founding Fathers. As much as I revere those amazingly brilliant men, I cannot ignore that most of them kept slaves, none of their wives (even the educated ones) had any voice in governance, nor did they know that social class is not the only determinant of intelligence.

It is possible to honor the wisdom and genius of some of our ancient ancestors, but always, within limits. The ancient Greeks gave us most of our western intellectual treasures: curiosity, scientific observation, philosophy, and logic. The Romans gave us an excellent system of law, the basis of an orderly society. Christianity and Judaism gave us compassion and care for the poor. The Renaissance gave us great art, music, and the miracle of Shakespeare. The Europe of the 16th century gave us needed corrections to tradition: reforms of religion and rejection of the Rights of Kings. It also gave us the beginnings of universal literacy and the revolutions in science that benefit us all.

It is wise for us to revere these things and not discard them as useless tradition and the product of "Dead White Men." Such notions are throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

Pick your traditions carefully. The past is both a treasury and a nightmare for the unwary.

679 words

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