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# What Are American Traditions?

By RUSSELL KIRK

EVERYONE seems to be enthusiastic about tradition nowadays—especially the people who denounce most things established in morals and politics. Professor Henry Steele Commager thinks that the great American tradition is a tradition of doubting everything; Mr. E. V. Walter, writing in *Partisan Review*, endeavors to establish a radical tradition of knocking institutions down; even Communists avow their enthusiasm for “the American tradition of civil rights,” particularly the Fifth Amendment. One of the more amusing instances of this new affection was an article by Mr. Robert Gorham Davis, a Marxist, in *The American Scholar*, five years ago, in which he denounced with a virulence which would have done credit to Marx himself a great many people who had deviated from the “democratic tradition” of America—the Southern Agrarians, the New Critics, and everyone else who failed to admit that the American Tradition is a levelling collectivism. “Every circumstance in this country has tended to the strengthening of this tradition,” he wrote, “and no social basis exists for a rival tradition of serious cultural significance.”

Now I happen to think that America has room aplenty for a variety of traditions; diversity and freedom of choice, indeed, are themselves American traditions. And I do not think that there is a Marxist “tradition” embedded in American ways and hearts. Therefore I believe it to be worth the trouble to write something about what the word “tradition” really means, especially here in America.

“Nobody can make a tradition,” Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote; “it takes a century to make it.” There are American traditions, because there have been three centuries of American history; yet this is a brief period of time, when one remembers that some of the traditions of Europe and Asia and Africa have their roots in a past ten thousand years distant. The American experience, moreover, commenced just at the time when the force of tradition in Europe was beginning to give ground before private judgment, widespread literacy, philosophical rationalism, and modern exact science. Yet despite its late growth, tradition in America has far greater influence than many Americans

admit, exercising still a power over American minds which a pragmatic educational system and a thoroughgoing mechanization of life have been unable to efface.

The word "tradition" has several usages, of which the two most important, in our time, are these: (1) a belief or body of beliefs handed down from age to age by oral communication; (2) a custom handed down from one age to another, acquiring by prescription almost the force of law. Until the end of the eighteenth century, the word ordinarily was used to describe Christian doctrines not explicit in the scriptures, but accepted as valid because they had been communicated from the earliest ages of the Church, and presumably originated in divine revelation.

No decent definition of the word "tradition" will permit of its employment as a synonym of "ideology." Democracy is not a tradition, nor is monarchy, nor is Marxism, nor is Benthamism. It is possible for traditions to exist under a democratic domination, or under a monarchical regime; and probably traditions will persist, although much discouraged by one means or another, under a Marxist state or a Benthamite domination of dry utilitarianism. Traditions are not abstractions; they are particular beliefs and customs closely related to private life and faith. The American Republic has its traditions, and so has the Cambodian Kingdom; but traditions are not created by political authority, and ought not to be debased into party slogans.

Only for the past century and a half has the word "tradition" been employed to signify "ancient customs" or "established habits of life in society." Edmund Burke, for instance, writing in the last years of the eighteenth century, used the word "prescription" to convey these meanings, rather than the word "tradition."

When we speak of tradition in America, then, generally we mean prescriptive social habits, prejudices, customs, and political usages which most people accept with little question, as an intellectual legacy from their ancestors. They take these customs and opinions to be good because they have long been accepted as good, and they inquire very little into the origins or sanctions for these traditions. These traditions are very numerous, and some are in conflict with others; yet, provisionally, we may take for examples of American traditions such received opinions as the following: belief in a spiritual order which in some fashion governs our mundane order; belief in political self-

government; belief in the importance to human persons of certain natural private rights; belief in the value of marriage and the family.

Now of the examples given here, none are entirely peculiar to America; and it must be borne in mind that America originated very few of her own traditions—except for such remnants of Indian tradition as survive in odd corners—but instead received nearly all her traditions from the Old World, modifying them somewhat to suit the American experience. Tradition does not recognize militant nationalism, and it would be presumptuous to write as if Americans had manufactured an entirely new set of received opinions to supersede the judgment of the ages. The religious and moral traditions of America are derived almost wholly from venerable Judeo-Christian sources; as a vigorous dissenting scholar of our time, Professor T. V. Smith, writes, “Our religious system is Judeo-Christian, and we must put ourselves inside that Weltanschauung, not outside it, if we are to further our common spiritual ends.” In this body of Judeo-Christian ethical and spiritual tradition, Protestant Christianity has long had the preponderant influence in America; but Catholicism also has made itself felt strongly since the eighteenth century, and now is almost coordinate in power with Protestant tradition; while Judaism has very greatly increased its influence in America during the past sixty or seventy years. The whole body of assumptions that underlie American private life and social policy, indeed, is profoundly Christian; and these assumptions exercise their power through the force of tradition, rather than the authority of positive law, America having no establishment of religion. The fact that the Christian tradition in America often is flouted does not mean that it has ceased to exist: as T. R. Glover wrote more than forty years ago, in his *The Christian Tradition and Its Verification*, “Whether there be truth in the Christian religion or not, our first fact is a world-wide society, with a history of nineteen centuries. It touches every part of life, conditions and suggests our thoughts, shapes us, and makes a background for us—and all this in ways that are beyond our reckoning or our understanding—so that we can hardly think of ourselves apart from the fact of the Christian Church and its influence.” The fundament of tradition in America, then, is simply world-wide Christian tradition. America has no new religion and no new morality. And that this tradition is actually increasing in power, the addition to the American oath of allegiance of the qualifying phrase “under God,” by act of Congress in 1954, suggests rather strongly.

If American religious and ethical traditions come almost wholly from Christian and Jewish sources (combining, of course, those classical ideas which were incorporated into Christian and Western civilization), American social traditions are derived chiefly from British tradition. The polyglot nature of the twentieth-century population of the United States has not altered this fact: in one degree or another, American citizens of other racial or national origins have come to conform to the old British pattern substantially established in the seventeenth century. Only the Germans and the Irish have maintained in America, over any great period of time, a distinct body of traditions derived from non-English sources; and even with the Germans and the Irish, the established British set of social traditions has prevailed for the most part, the exceptions being of no great significance. Islands of French tradition remain in Louisiana, and of Spanish tradition in New Mexico and Texas; but these are not considerable enough to constitute any coherent opposition to the domination of British social customs and inherited opinions. American attitudes toward representative government, private property, local and private rights, political community, decent manners, family relationships, and even the physical pattern of civilized life, all are derived principally from British custom; and these constitute true traditions, accepted unquestioningly by the mass of Americans as "the American way of life," even though they were originally imported from Britain in the seventeenth century, and have been strengthened by borrowings from British society ever since. The American frontier and American democracy modified these traditions for a time, but never modified them beyond recognition. These traditions have been woven into the American consciousness still more intricately by an education based, formerly at least, on the study of English literature.

Thus—as a German-born scholar, Professor Carl J. Friedrich, observed recently—"To all intents and purposes, the United States is today a highly traditional society, in the sense that arguments from tradition carry a great deal of conviction." Dr. Friedrich goes on to remark that American tradition, indeed, is especially accessible to analysis, "since it is embodied in certain written documents available for inspection and detailed consideration"—the Declaration of Independence, the Constitutions of the United States and of the several States, and the principal writings and speeches of Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Hamilton, and Adams. The appeal to tradition, reli-

gious or social, almost always meets with a sympathetic response in America; the hostility toward tradition, often to be found in modern Europe—French or Spanish radical detestation of “traditionalism” may suffice for examples—is an unusual phenomenon in America. Radical Americans in politics, even the Communists, ordinarily have endeavored to prove that their particular program was really in harmony with the deeper American traditions. To say that America is a land without traditions, then, is to fly in the face of popular opinion and of historical evidence. America has not created many traditions; but she has borrowed and inherited great traditions, chiefly the Christian tradition in religion and the English tradition in politics, and enlarged upon these.

Yet, this said, the student of American thought and society needs to acknowledge that there is no *single* body of traditions in America, and that all traditions labor under certain handicaps in the United States. The diversity of religious tradition already has been suggested; the cultural and social tradition, too, has its several branches, the principal ones being the Southern and the New England bodies of tradition. A South Carolinian and a man from Maine ordinarily have more in common with each other than either of them would have, in terms of social tradition, with a Rumanian; still, considerable differences of habit and taste separate them even today, and these traditional differences, profoundly important when human welfare is in question, too often are ignored by the statistical sociologist. Moreover, the average South Carolinian and the average man from Maine both tend to lack in some degree the almost congenital attachment of many Europeans to things established, as M. Gabriel Marcel suggests in his essay “The Concept of Spiritual Heritage” (*Confluence*, September, 1953): “For an ever increasing number of persons, our heritage is no longer accepted as such. . . . I thought of an American officer in a little town in Burgundy that had been almost destroyed by the war who said to a young friend of mine, ‘You should be grateful to us for having destroyed all these antiquities. Now you will be able to build a new and more orderly town.’”

The bustle of American life, the migratory habits of many Americans, the frequent exchange or rebuilding of houses, the rarity of old landed families, the great influence of press and radio, and—until recent decades—the continual influx of masses of immigrants, in short, have operated to decrease the influence of tradition in American life. But

at the same time, American respect for the Founding Fathers, for republican institutions, and for prescriptive religion, morality, and family relationships, have checked this assault upon tradition, so that, curiously enough, in a nation with only three centuries of history behind it, the mass of the people are probably as sympathetic to tradition as is the bulk of the population anywhere else in the world. In an age when tradition has been terribly hacked and battered in China, India, Africa, Eastern Europe, and much of Western Europe, Americans generally have reaffirmed their faith in the wisdom of their ancestors and in their prescriptive ways of living.

Professor David Riesman, in his *Lonely Crowd*, suggests that the "tradition-directed individual" is a dying breed in America, to be replaced by "other-directed individuals" who will make the mass-appetites and fads of the hour, rather than prescription, the basis of their conduct. Certainly an ominous tendency in such a direction may be discerned in many quarters in the United States. Mr. Riesman's principal example of a tradition-guided individual, however, is a Harlem scrubwoman, come to America from the West Indies, and living a life intellectually isolated from the people who surround her. This peculiar example suggests that Mr. Riesman tends to leave out of account the much more pervasive traditions of Christianity and British political and social usage, which, together with American veneration of their constitutional and juristic structure, form a body of traditions much more important and elevated than a scrubwoman's prejudices and superstitions. It is quite possible to be at once a tradition-directed individual in America and at the same time a person of high intellectual attainment. Speaking for such thinking traditionalists, Mr. Richard Weaver, in his *Ideas Have Consequences*, makes "a plea for piety": "The plea for piety asks only that we admit the right to self-ordering of the substance of other beings. . . . The most vocal part of modern impiety is the freely expressed contempt for the past. The habit is to look upon history in the same way that we look upon nature, as an unfortunate inheritance, and we struggle with equal determination to free ourselves from each." Professor Weaver sees in Christian and classical and Western tradition, and in American prescription—especially the traditions of American rural life—an incalculably powerful bulwark against the sterile collectivism of a mass-society without piety.

Sometimes, however, the claims made for "American tradition" are extravagant. "Democracy" is spoken of as an "American tradition,"

and so is "individualism." Although of course a measure of democracy and a strong element of aggressive individuality were present in American society from its beginnings, neither of these general terms can properly be said to have been so generally and unquestioningly accepted by the mass of men as to have constituted a valid tradition. Tradition is something more than mere political ideology. Properly speaking, the traditional attachment in America has been to prescriptive local and representative government, rather than to "Democracy" as an abstraction; while as for "Individualism," the term was rarely employed in American social discussion until the 1920's. Tradition, indeed, by its very nature is opposed to moral and social isolation—that is, to doctrinaire individualism in the sense of Bentham or Godwin or Spencer. Tradition, by definition, is the common possession of a people, what Gabriel Marcel calls "diffuse gratitude," closely joined to piety, and linking together the generations that are dead with the generation that is now living and with the generations that are yet to be born. Therefore there can be no tradition of "individualism," if by individualism is meant the doctrine that man can be guided simply by his private interests and private stock of reason. T. R. Glover puts this succinctly:

Robinson Crusoe on his island is hardly a type of the human soul. We are too individualistic—too apt to forget that Robinson Crusoe had an axe and a number of other fascinating things brought from England, all of which implied humanity, and the long history of civilization. He had also a Bible in English, we may remember, which again implied a long history of religion. The individual inherits all this—he is made by it; it is in him; and sound thinking requires the recognition of this fact also, as well as all other relevant facts, in the fulness of its meaning. Without the religious history of the race behind us, not one of us is likely to achieve anything, either in his own religious life or in his thinking. If he starts afresh, he is most like an artist who begins without perspective, and ignores all that has been learned and felt of color.

Here is expressed the essential value of tradition; and the American, like Robinson Crusoe, is not a law unto himself, but participates in that vast body of tradition which goes back to Job and to Plato, and far beyond Job and Plato.