

THE ALTERNATIVE

Vol. XXXIV No. 3
February 2007

Dear Reader,

This issue of the Newsletter concerns an opposition that is a central problem for religion, education, culture and politics in the United States. That opposition is one between traditionalism and progressivism. Both progress and tradition can be good things so long as they are not opposed to one another. A healthy tension between the two is needed. Unfortunately, what we have most often had for more than a century is a radical split and conflict between traditionalists and progressivists.

In the first essay, the history of the split is traced especially in religion. A parallel split in education, culture and politics is examined through the representative figures of John Dewey, Bill O'Reilly and George W. Bush. The two essays that follow are from classic studies of tradition, seen not as an enemy of progress but its necessary partner.

TRADITION AND PROGRESS

By Gabriel Moran

Tradition starts out as a verb, the act of handing on. A people tries to convey to the next generation what it considers its most valuable practices. The pattern of things which are handed on constitutes "a tradition." Nearly all peoples have rituals surrounding birth, puberty, marriage, dying, eating, drinking, singing, dancing, etc. The actual rituals can differ widely from one group to another. Long standing traditions are difficult to change. Nonetheless, the repeated act of handing on involves some change. Reformers periodically arise to pronounce that traditional elements are useless or worse. An individual reformer has to be careful about claiming to know the whole tradition and how its elements go together. No isolated individual is wise enough to judge that a tradition of centuries or millennia should be abandoned.

Religion is one of the chief sources for the idea of tradition and offers telling examples of the relation between tradition and progress. The religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam are most obviously tied to a particular historical era and particular historical figures in the distant past. But all religions make claim to a long and mostly glorious history. To an outsider Christianity or Islam has an obvious beginning, but each claims to continue - or more exactly, recover - a tradition co-extensive with human history.

The idea of reform is intrinsic to religion. Each religious tradition grows out of a previous tradition. At first, the new is taken to be one of the various strands within the

tradition. At some point, not always obvious, the difference is so great that there is another tradition. It is unlikely that Jesus set out to found a Christian tradition nor did Luther intend to begin a Lutheran tradition. The reformer claims not to be starting something new but to be re-forming, that is, recovering the deepest meaning of the old. That recovered essence is usually something simpler and more interiorized; the external forms of ritual and legal codes are seen to be obstacles to progress.

The danger in reform is that one destroys ritual symbols that are an important glue of the community. Anthropologist Mary Douglas criticized the Catholic bishops for trying to substitute love of neighbor for fish on Friday; “the color signals were manned by color blind people.” When reformers attack tradition they have in mind accretions that are not integral to the development or progress of the tradition. It is easy to fall into an attitude of being against all rituals because rituals of their nature are always “out of date.”

As one example, the Christian tradition has been in a constant process of reform. At some moments, severe crises test the limits of the tradition. The Protestant tradition within the Christian tradition was especially hit in the late nineteenth century, the Catholic tradition in the last fifty years. At such moments, people seek stability and hold on to what they can; they get called traditionalists. In contrast, people seeking widespread reform may call themselves progressivists. The late nineteenth century opened a split in Protestantism between those anxious to join the march of scientific and technological progress and those who resisted modernity’s criticism by clinging to the obvious meaning of a few ancient texts whose origin was divine.

Progress had been a central word from the beginning of the United States. As Dupont chemical would later advertise “progress is our most important product.” “Progressive,” however, took on a specific meaning when imported from England at the end of the nineteenth century. The progressive movement from 1900 to 1917 sought economic and political reforms, such as unemployment insurance and social security. Most people are probably unaware that the progressive movement was inspired by and often led by Protestant evangelicals.

Unfortunately, the progressive movement did not have deep enough roots to pass most of its desired legislation or to survive the First World War. In fact, progressivism was hijacked as a support of the war, based on the hope and the promise that a more developed federal government would be able to fulfill progressivist dreams. Woodrow Wilson who, until his presidential nomination, had opposed every progressive reform, ran as a progressive. Once in office he tried to take the American dream of democracy and progress to the whole world.

The war was followed not by the progressivist dream but by reactionary hysteria in the political system, such as shipping 246 undesirables to the Soviet Union, rounding up 4000 suspicious persons, and making anyone who could pay five dollars an assistant attorney general. The world of Protestantism saw the rise of fundamentalism, a word invented in 1920. Far from defending tradition, fundamentalism was a reaction to

progressivism, a desperate clinging to a few select “fundamentals” without much reference to the tradition as a whole.

In recent decades the Episcopal and Roman Catholic traditions seem to be tearing themselves apart in a battle between progressivists and traditionalists. In the Roman Catholic church there was a dramatic event that brought on immediate radical change followed by a massive reaction. The reformers are frustrated by a lack of progress, the traditionalists are frustrated that the tradition they assumed is no longer there.

One of the key figures in the progressive movement was John Dewey. He led the progressives into support of the war, a disastrous choice for the movement. The only prominent area where the opposition of traditional and progressive held was education; the opposition continues to the present. Before World War I progressive education referred to improving the schools of the urban poor; after the war it became an upper class experiment in the suburbs.

When Dewey achieved prominence as an educational writer in the 1890s, “traditional education” meant to him a study of the classics by the upper class and mere rudiments of literacy for the masses. (Only six percent of students went to high school). Being progressive meant bringing to the schools a challenging curriculum, a fact that Dewey’s dense writing style never succeeded in conveying to the general public. He laid his ambitious project on the shoulders of the poorly paid young women who were the schoolteachers. Dewey thought that in the nineteenth century the home, the church and the work site had been made irrelevant for education in a modern society. It was a disastrous miscalculation.

By the 1930s, Dewey had come to realize that the school cannot carry the entire burden of “social reform.” Education is for “passing on tradition” in a double sense. Schools are to pass on the tradition but they cannot do that unless the other education forms, starting with the family, pass on the tradition for the school to do its limited role in education.

Dewey was chagrined by people running “child centered” progressive schools who claimed to be his followers. In his last educational book, Experience and Education, Dewey proposed at the beginning and the end of the book to get rid of the term “progressive education.” In between, however, he unwisely perpetuated the opposition of traditional and progressive. He continued to caricature some schools as traditional, though traditional school had changed its meaning from the 1890s. He did not and could not succeed in getting rid of the term “progressive education” unless he was willing to rethink “traditional education,” which he never did.

I think that what controlled his opposition of traditional and progressive was his lifelong reaction against his Christian upbringing. By 1886 he was in revolt against that background, proposing that the church’s mission was to go out of existence in supporting a progressivist agenda. Although Dewey rebelled against his Vermont

Sunday School, he retained the religious dream of unity. "Religious" was an adjective that he could apply everywhere, including the public school.

John Dewey's cultural conflict started within himself. So also we have the curious case of Bill O'Reilly today. I do not cite him to ridicule him, as his opponents regularly do. I take him to be an important figure who is best understood by being paired with his severest critics. Many of his causes are good ones but he is often his own worst enemy although his seeming lapses of speech may be intentional. It is difficult to say given that he has three hours of unscripted public air time every day, writes a newspaper column, and publishes an annual book. Anyone who talks that much is bound to say some absurd things. No one should be required to listen to him or read him but that should be a condition for attacking his views. David Letterman called O'Reilly's views "crap," but then admitted he never listened to O'Reilly.

Like Woodrow Wilson, O'Reilly seems to delight in being what he calls the most hated person in the country. That is evidence to him that he is right. But another part of him seems to seethe with resentment that he is not accepted by the cultural elite. He parades his Levittown childhood and his degree from Marist College as proof he is a man of the people. He also is quick to point out the degree he later got from Harvard, even as he accuses Harvard and the New York Times of destroying the country.

O'Reilly divides the country into traditionalists and secular progressivists. The adjective would suggest that another kind of progressivism might be acceptable but he never pursues that line. He distances himself from the religious right and he is quite critical of "conservative talk radio." He is suspicious of government intrusions into the private life of the individual. The contrast of progressivist and traditionalist is usually made by people who call themselves progressivist. O'Reilly is a little unusual in calling himself a traditionalist but he is a man in search of a tradition. He is a product of a Long Island Catholicism that continued until the 1970s (see Alice McDermott's novels for the feel of the time and place). That form of Catholicism was loaded with traditionalism and it had severe problems in shifting to a tradition more open to debate within itself and to cooperation with other traditions. Like most Catholic traditionalists, he is angry at progressivists for stealing the church of his youth. He admits he was in conflict with that church when he was young but it was his standard of truth and nostalgically still is.

O'Reilly insists that religion should be kept out of politics but the myth of America and the morality instilled by his religious upbringing determine his positions as a self-proclaimed "culture warrior." His use of the metaphor of "war" by intention or not creates an unbridgeable gulf between two camps. Still, he seems genuinely concerned to treat people fairly but he can be rough on a guest who disagrees with him. It should be noted, however, that he actually has guests who disagree with him which cannot be said of many cable talk shows. He does not seem to realize that he comes across as brusque and uncivil. He does have people who are invited on expressly to criticize his behavior and he seems to listen. What he badly lacks is a sense of ironic humor that allows serious criticism without sounding preachy or bitter. In his "debate" with Stephen Colbert, O'Reilly seemed utterly lost as to how to play the game.

Bill O'Reilly insists that he does not comment on politics; his interest is "culture." The two are distinguishable but not easily separated. Daniel Patrick Moynihan said that the central insight of conservatives is that culture not politics determines the success of a society. The central insight of liberals is that culture can be changed by politics.

If politicians wish to change culture or tradition, they have to understand the past and not try to impose a scheme that is not in some way already present. I take as my last example the curious case of George W. Bush. When the Wall Street Journal in January, 2007, published an essay by George W. Bush, some people thought it amusing that the Journal found it necessary to identify the writer as the president of the United States. I thought it was helpful in that nowhere in the title ("What the Congress Can Do for America") or in the body of the essay did he refer to the United States, the country in which he holds the office of president. Like all presidents, but beyond any other president (with the possible exception of Wilson) Bush lives in a mythical place called America and has a vision of the world that supposes the future will look like his America, land of liberty and justice for all.

In his 2007 State of the Union Address, he briefly referred to Iraq by saying that it had voted in "the most progressive constitution in the Arab world." That phrase is central to his thinking; he is a radical progressivist. The younger Bush has tried to break with a mostly modest attitude of his father who said he could never manage the "vision thing." The metaphor of vision pushes in the direction of a radical break with tradition in which the aural, oral and tactile keep vision under control.

In the key election of 1912, Wilson ran as a "conservative progressive," a clever move. Once in office his progressivism had little concern with a conservative attitude. In the 2000 election, George W. Bush ran as a "compassionate conservative," a brilliant strategy of combining compassionate, a mantra of the left, with conservative. For many people, that combination promised a healing of left and right, liberal and conservative. Once in office he proved to be neither liberal nor conservative. Instead, he is a progressivist in foreign policy and a traditionalist in domestic affairs. The combination may seem illogical but once this opposition exists it hardly matters which side you are on at any moment. He has absorbed the apocalyptic imagery of the early evangelical progressivists. Like Wilson, he is convinced that the future will vindicate him, no matter the slings and arrows of the present. If 70 percent of the people oppose his vision for remaking the world, that proves the need for a strong and courageous leader.

He reminds us in every speech that Sept. 11, 2001 is the pivotal event that revealed we are at "war with the organized enemies of freedom." In his initial address after that event, he said "our mission is now clear: to rid the world of evil." In his second inaugural address he said that the objective of U.S. policy is "ending tyranny in our world." His rhetoric regularly goes way beyond politics. He set out to create a model democracy in the Middle East with little knowledge (and even less curiosity) about the traditions in that part of the world.

Both traditionalism and progressivism lack a tradition of restraint. People who were called conservative in the 1950s believed in fiscal restraint and were skeptical of grand schemes of the government. Robert Taft would laugh at the idea that Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz or Gingrich could be called conservative. Mr. Bush's view of tradition is shaped by his upbringing, the Yale of the 1950s, the combination of New England privilege overlaid with an "aw shucks" regular-guy-from-Texas outlook. Attacking him as either too conservative or traditional misses the point entirely. Some of his most vociferous critics are also immersed in the progressivist myth of the country. For any criticism to have a chance of working we need to rediscover some of the tradition and traditions that influence our culture, education and religion.

TRADITION: THE LIVING RELIGION OF DEAD PEOPLE

By Jaroslav Pelikan

To begin at the beginning, in fact with our own beginnings: tradition derives some of its vindication from the sheer fact of its existence, "just because it's there" as the cliché about mountain climbing says. Coming to terms with the presence of the traditions from which we derived is, or should be, a fundamental part of the process of growing up. Obviously that ought to include a knowledge of the content of those traditions. We do not have a choice between being shaped by our intellectual and spiritual DNA and not being shaped by it, as though we had sprung into being by some kind of cultural spontaneous generation. Some teenagers (including certain teenagers well past their teens) seem to wear their clothes as though they had invented sex; yet their very presence here is an indication that someone must have thought of it before.

We do, nevertheless, have some choices to make. One is whether to understand our origins in our tradition or merely to let that tradition work on us without our understanding it, in short, whether to be conscious participants or unconscious victims. Once understood, the tradition, unlike our biological DNA, does confront us with a further choice between recovery and rejection, with a range of possibilities that combine partial recovery with partial rejection. That choice, too, is real. But to base recovery on ignorance and implicit faith, as some previous generations have done, or to base rejection on ignorance and bigotry, as many in our own generation have done, is not worthy of a free and rational person.

We do well to recognize as infantile an attitude toward our parents that regards them as all-wise or all-powerful and that is blind to their human foibles. But we must recognize no less that it is adolescent, once we have discovered those foibles, to deny our parents the respect and reverence that is their due for having been, under God, the means through which has come the only life we have.

Maturity in our relation to our parents consists in going beyond both a belief in their omniscience and a disdain for their weakness, to an understanding and a gratitude for their decisive part in that ongoing process in which now we, too, must take our place, as

heirs and yet free. So it is in our relation to our spiritual and intellectual parentage, our tradition. An abstract concept of parenthood is no substitute for our real parents, an abstract cosmopolitanism no substitute for our real traditions. To be tone deaf to the tradition is to be unable to hear the voices of the past or the present – or of the future.

Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. And I should add, it is traditionalism that gives tradition such a bad name. The reformers of every age, whether political or religious or literary, have protested against the tyranny of the dead, and in doing so have called for innovations and insight in place of tradition. In his first book, Nature, published in 1836, Ralph Waldo Emerson put their protest and their call into one question: “Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition”?

The dichotomy between tradition and insight breaks down under the weight of history itself. A “leap of progress” is not a standing broad jump, which begins at the line of where we are now; it is a running broad jump through where we have been to where we go next. The growth of insight – in science, in the arts, in philosophy and theology – has not come through progressively sloughing off more and more of tradition, as though insight would be deepest and purest when it has finally freed itself of the dead past. It simply has not worked that way in the history of the tradition, and it does not work that way now.

By including the dead in the circle of discourse, we enrich the quality of the conversation. Of course, we do not listen only to the dead, nor are we a tape recording of the tradition. That really would be the dead faith of the living, not the living faith of the dead. But we acquire the “insight” which Emerson was pleading when we learn to interact creatively with “tradition” which he was denouncing. An older contemporary of Emerson’s, whom Emerson rightly regarded as the wisest and most universal mind of the century, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, saw it more deeply and said it more clearly: “What you have as heritage/ Take now as task;/ For thus you will make it your own.”

Knowledge of the traditions that have shaped us for good or ill or some of both is not a sufficient preparation for the kind of future that faces our children and grandchildren in the twenty-first century – not a sufficient preparation, but a necessary preparation. The rediscovery of the tradition belongs to the design of the curriculum, and to the definition of the goals and the content of general education, also in a nation that has - if I may say so traditionally – been more hungry for its future than addicted to its past. That rediscovery is made possible, and made necessary, by the continuity of tradition, what Edmund Burke called a “partnership in all science, all art, every virtue.” But, Burke added, “As the ends of such a partnership cannot be obtained in many generations, it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are dead and those who are to be born.” And that is not a bad definition of a living tradition.

TRADITION: DEMOCRACY OF THE DEAD

By G.K. Chesterton

There is one thing that I have never from my youth up been able to understand. I have never been able to understand where people got the idea that democracy was in some way opposed to tradition. It is obvious that tradition is only democracy extended through time. It is trusting to a consensus of common human voices rather than to some isolated or arbitrary record. The man who quotes some German historian against the Catholic Church, for example, is strictly appealing to aristocracy. He is appealing to the superiority of one expert against the awful authority of a mob.

It is quite easy to see why a legend is treated, and ought to be treated, more respectfully than a book of history. The legend is generally made by the majority of people in the village who are sane. The book is generally written by the one man in the village who is mad. Those who urge against tradition that men in the past were ignorant may go and urge it at the Carlton Club, along with the statement that voters in the slums are ignorant. It will not do for us. If we attach great importance to the opinions of ordinary men in great unanimity when we are dealing with daily matters, there is no reason why we should disregard it when we are dealing with history or fable.

Tradition may be defined as an extension of the franchise. Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about. All democrats object to men being disqualified by the accident of birth; tradition objects to their being disqualified by the accident of death. Democracy tells us not to neglect a good man's opinion, even if he is our groom; tradition asks us not to neglect a good man's opinion, even if he is our father. I cannot separate the two ideas of democracy and tradition; it seems evident to me that they are the same idea. We will have the dead at our councils. The ancient Greeks voted by stones; these shall vote by tombstones. It is all quite regular and official, for most tombstones, like most ballot papers, are marked with a cross.

I have first to say, therefore, that if I have had a bias, it was always a bias in favor of democracy, and therefore of tradition. Before we come to any theoretic or logical beginning I am content to allow for that personal equation; I have always been more inclined to believe the ruck of hard-working people than to believe that special and troublesome literary class to which I belong. I prefer even the fancies and prejudices of the people who see life from the inside to the clearest demonstrations of the people who see life from the outside. I would always trust the old wives' fables against the old maids' facts. As long as wit is mother wit, it can be as wild as it pleases.

Correspondence to: Alternative Religious Education, Inc.

Box 1405

Montauk, NY 11954

E-mail: gm1405@aol.com

Back copies of this Newsletter are available at: www.nyu.edu/classes/gmoran

