



# A Dead White European Male Comforts a 20th Century Jew

One of the most moving experiences in my teaching career occurred after a seminar discussion of Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. A student came up to me to explain that she had missed the previous class because it was a Jewish holiday (a little-observed one, which I had quite forgotten), and she wanted to assure me that she had borrowed another student's copious notes. She also told me how much she valued the course and particularly how affected she had been by Burke's book, for it gave her, she said, a new appreciation of Judaism—of her Judaism, which was a rigorous form of Orthodoxy (so rigorous that she had had to get a special dispensation to attend a secular university).

I confess that I had never thought of Burke as an apologist for Judaism, nor of the *Reflections*, written in 1790, as having much bearing on present-day Orthodoxy. Indeed, some students had been disturbed by passages in the book referring to "money-jobbers, usurers, and Jews." But this student was not troubled by these lapses. What impressed her was Burke's defense of tradition and reli-

gion—and of religion as tradition. This is what spoke to her, as an Orthodox Jew, so directly and powerfully.

Tradition is, indeed, one of the main motifs of the *Reflections*, the crucial distinction, as Burke saw it, between the French Revolution of 1789 and the English "Glorious Revolution" of 1688. Where the French sought to create a society from scratch, based upon principles dictated by nature, reason, and right, the English tried to retain as much of the past as possible. The English revolutionaries, Burke said, wanted nothing more than "to preserve our antient indisputable laws and liberties, and that antient constitution of government which is our only security for law and liberty." To ensure that the revolution itself would be "an inheritance from our forefathers," they sought precedents in "our histories, in our records, in our acts of parliament and journals of parliament," going back to that "antient charter" the Magna Carta, and beyond that to "the still more antient

standing law of the kingdom." This, for Burke, was the "pedigree," the "patrimony," the "hereditary title," the "entailed inheritance" of English liberties.

The past served not only to validate the English revolution; it validated the future as well. "People will not look forward to posterity, who never look backward to their ancestors." And the past itself was not fixed and immutable; on the contrary, it was the only security for change and reform. "The idea of inheritance furnishes a sure principle of conservation and a sure principle of transmission, without at all excluding a principle of improvement. It leaves acquisition free; but it secures what it acquires."

The French revolutionaries, on the other hand, destroyed whatever of the past they could, including that most venerable of institutions, the church, and tried to subvert the most basic human impulse, religion. We know, Burke declared, that "man is by his constitution a religious animal; that atheism is against, not only our reason but our instincts; and that it cannot prevail long." If the French Revolution should succeed in subverting Christianity, he predicted, the void

BY GERTRUDE HIMMELFARB

would be filled by “some uncouth, pernicious, and degrading superstition.” (This prediction was borne out three years later, with the inauguration of the “Worship of Reason” and the “Cult of the Supreme Being,” complete with a new calendar, new festivals, and new saints.)

As religion is rooted in human nature, Burke reasoned, so the church is in human society. For the church represents “the rational and natural ties that connect the human understanding and affections to the divine” and that make up “that wonderful structure, Man.” And the best kind of religious institution, he believed, was a church establishment that was part of the state and yet independent of it (by virtue of its independent property), thus consecrating church and state alike. This kind of establishment was especially important in a parliamentary regime, for it imbued free citizens with a “wholesome awe,” reminding them that they were not entirely free, that they were only the “temporary possessors and life-renters” of the commonwealth, and that they were accountable to “the one great master, author and founder of society.”

An established church, however, did not preclude the existence of other religions. Other religions, Burke explained, would be tolerated not as unbelievers tolerated them, out of neglect or contempt for all religions, but out of *respect* for them. The English “reverently and affectionately protect all religions, because they love and venerate the great principle upon which they all agree, and the great object to which they are all directed.”

My student could have found a defense of her religion elsewhere, notably in her own religious texts and authorities. But Burke gave her a more universal, less parochial justification of her faith. Where Burke challenged an Enlightenment that, in the name of reason and freedom, threatened Christianity, she saw Jewish Orthodoxy being threatened, or at least demeaned, by the “enlightened” secular ideology of her own age. And where he defended the idea of an established, yet tolerant, church, she recognized just such an arrangement in her own dominantly Christian yet tolerant American society.

Most important was the role Burke attached to tradition, in religion as in society, that endeared him to my student.

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Burke has been criticized for being overly deferential to tradition and insufficiently respectful of both reason and revelation. If this is so, it is less a problem for Jews than for Christians. No religion is as tradition-bound and history-centered as Judaism. And Orthodox Judaism is all the more so.

Of the 613 commandments prescribed for devout Jews, some are universal moral principles binding on all civilized human beings. But others are unique to Jews; they are what distinguish Jews from all other faiths and peoples. To non-observant Jews, some of these are arbitrary and irrational, relics of primitive customs and beliefs. For the Orthodox, they carry the moral weight of authority and tradition, having been decreed by revered rabbis (citing sources in the Bible that are not always precisely to the point) and having been observed by generations of ancestors.

Burke has also been criticized for having too utilitarian a view of religion, valuing it as an instrument of social cohesion and moral edification, rather than as a personally moving and elevating spiritual experience. For Judaism, however, the utility and the spirituality of religion are not in contradiction. The observance of the laws and the participation in the community of worshippers are so much a part of the faith that they enhance rather than diminish the religious experience. They are the lived realization of the transcendent order. The common failure to appreciate this, to find something spiritually demeaning or impoverishing in such an ethical, communal, “utilitarian” religion, is itself a product of the Enlightenment, which denied the need for any transcendent basis for morality or community.

Perhaps the most provocative, and profound, passage in the *Reflections* is the

vindication of “prejudice” as a source of wisdom and virtue. “Prejudice” is Burke’s shorthand for all those aspects of life—habit, custom, convention, tradition, and, not least, religion—which did not conform to the Enlightenment’s view of reason. Prejudice in Burke’s sense is not arbitrary or irrational. On the contrary, it has within it the “latent” wisdom and virtue that has accumulated over the ages:

We are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason; because we suspect that this stock in each man is small, and that the individuals would do better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations, and of ages. Many of our men of speculation, instead of exploding general prejudices, employ their sagacity to discover the latent wisdom which prevails in them. If they find what they seek, and they seldom fail, they think it more wise to continue the prejudice, with the reason involved, than to cast away the coat of prejudice, and to leave nothing but the naked reason; because prejudice, with its reason, has a motive to give action...and an affection which will give it permanence. Prejudice is of ready application in the emergency; it previously engages the mind in a steady course of wisdom and virtue, and does not leave the man hesitating in the moment of decision, sceptical, puzzled, and unresolved. Prejudice renders a man’s virtue his habit; and not a series of unconnected acts. Through just prejudice, his duty becomes a part of his nature.

It took a bold and original mind, like Burke’s, to make so radical a critique of the Enlightenment. And it took a brave and mature mind, like my student’s, to see in that critique an explication and appreciation of her own faith—a religion that draws upon all the resources of its people and heritage to sanctify both wisdom and virtue.

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# AMERICANS

"How do we keep our balance? That I can tell you in a word—tradition!"

—Tevye, in *Fiddler on the Roof*

## The Last Western Traditionalists

BY MARK STEYN

**W**hat's the musical *Fiddler on the Roof* about? The opening number spells it out: "Tradition! Tradition!"

*Fiddler* is based on a handful of Sholom Aleichem stories about a dairyman in a Ukrainian *shtetl*. Interestingly enough, Aleichem's stories are not about tradition: When Aleichem's Tevye hears that his daughter has pledged herself to the penniless tailor, he's not bothered about the tradition of arranged marriages being broken, only that he's been left out of the deal. Sholom Aleichem, who grew up in the Ukraine, never gave tradition a thought. The tradition theme was invented for the Broadway stage version by an American librettist, and brilliantly musicalised by an American composer and lyricist. That was what *they* thought the story ought to be about.

*Fiddler's* opening number tells you a lot about American attitudes toward tradition. The so-called New World is, in many ways, more mindful of tradition than the Old. If you do come across tradition in ancient Europe, you often find that, as in *Fiddler*, it's there because of the Americans.

Take the telephone. A few years back, British Telecom, as part of its "exciting" "new" look, decided to remove the country's distinctive red telephone kiosks. Admittedly, the kiosks had one basic flaw, which their designer, Sir Gilbert Scott, had not foreseen: The British were wont to use them as public toilets. This tended to discourage long phone calls. Nonetheless, the announcement of their demise prompted a public outcry: That's to say, the British denounced the removal of their red kiosks for about ten minutes and then found somewhere else to urinate late at night.

BT sold off the red boxes to interested parties around the world. A few Hong Kong millionaires had them installed as

showers. A shopping mall on Cape Cod snapped some up. Film producers acquired them for dropping into the background of scenes, thereby indicating to international audiences that this was somewhere in the United Kingdom.

Having abandoned one of the most instantly recognizable symbols of Britain, BT then installed U.S.-style street phones, although, displaying the usual British skill for aping the Americans to the point of caricature without ever getting it right, they installed them facing into the traffic, so that you couldn't hear a word. Instead of the British Crown, an "innovative design" firm came up with a new logo of a prancing ninny in red-and-blue striped underwear.

And then something curious happened. A year or two back, BT reintroduced red telephone boxes in Central London—*because the American tourists missed them*. They ripped out the new phones and replaced them with the old phones that they had ripped out to make way for the new phones. The boxes stand there now, down the Mall, round the back of the Palace, a rebuke to native feebleness: The British, it seems, now depend on Americans to maintain the traditions they lack the will to defend themselves.

American communications firms seem to have a better understanding of what constitutes a selling point with the public. Despite the upheavals of recent years, most American phone companies that have the right to do so still boast some form of the famous Bell logo. Directories even offer displays proudly illustrating the evolution of the bell symbol over the last century. Even on the cutting edge of the information superhighway, managers are at pains to emphasize continuity, to demonstrate to

the public that they're the true heirs of Alexander Graham Bell.

What happened in Britain could only occur in a culture with a willful disregard for tradition. Had, say, Coca-Cola been British, they'd have gone to some trendy marketing gurus who'd have told them the first thing they'd have to do was get rid of that dumb looking bottle and the squiggly writing. That, incidentally, is one reason why there is no British Coca-Cola. (True, Coke did try a "New Coke" flavor; Americans shot it down and the company quickly relented.)

These aren't trivial examples. If the most vigorous forms of U.S. capitalism understand the value of tradition, that speaks well for American society. And it's reflected all the way down the line to a zillion smaller businesses. The old guy who came and drilled my well in New Hampshire a couple of years ago had his truck emblazoned: "Ed Green and his Water Machine. A North Country tradition since 1934." Visiting Britons love to mock the shingles proclaiming "Irv's Paving, Established 1978." "What's the point," they snigger, "of boasting that you were established 19 years ago?" The point is an obvious one: Irv is *aspiring* to tradition.

**T**here's a superficial novelty in American life which is noisy and distracting, especially to Europeans who wander into New York coffee bars and order the Flavor of the Day (hazelnut-Eurasian-milfoil-cappuccino). Yet, for all the rampant miscegenation of American capitalism ("It's the great taste of Roloids—now in a pizza!"), the brash and vulgar Yanks are not, as the British like to sniff, crazed novelty junkies. When it comes to the important things, they're great traditionalists.