

# Living Tradition and Dead Traditionalism

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One of my favourite musicals, “Fiddler on the Roof,” tells the story of a poor milkman named Tevye, his family, and his community. He struggles to balance his desire for a stable life with all the changes that are coming to his poor village of Anatevka in the last days of czarist Russia. The musical begins with an extended musical number which lays the groundwork for the importance of tradition. Tradition tells us who we are, how to behave, how to relate with one another and with God. Tradition is the glue that holds a community together. Everyone has a role and knows what is expected of them. The rest of the musical shows the community struggling to find new traditions as life changes all around them.

Life is filled with traditions of all kinds. We just witnessed the coronation of King Charles, a ceremony which is filled with traditions, some of them dating back many hundreds of years. Politics is filled with traditions, from the pageantry of the speech from the throne, to the swearing in of a government after an election, to the primaries just beginning in the USA. Families celebrate their lives with all kinds of different traditions, from birthdays to other memorials. We all have our traditions, and they help us to mark the ebb and flow of our lives.

I was recently thinking about the whole notion of tradition as I read a report that the standard railroad gauge, the distance between the rails, in North America is 4 feet, 8.5 inches. What an exceedingly odd number! Who decided that?

Part of the story is that’s the way they built railroads in England. Since the first railroads in North America were built by English immigrants, they used the same gauge.

Why did the English use that gauge? The first railways were modelled on the tramways which preceded the railways, which used the same gauge. Tramways were built for wagons which had that wheel spacing, and the engineers simply used the same jigs and tools.

The wagons had that odd wheel spacing because many of the old, long-distance roads in England were worn with wheel ruts with that spacing. Those old roads had been built by Rome so their legions could travel long distances more easily. The ruts in the roads were that wide to accommodate the Roman war chariots. Finally, the wheels of those chariots were that far apart to accommodate the rear ends of the two horses which pulled the chariots.

This is why the standard railroad gauge today is 4 feet, 8.5 inches: that’s the width of the rear ends of two horses.

But that’s not the end of it. The story gets even more interesting. Modern space shuttles have two big booster rockets attached to the sides of the main fuel tank. These solid rocket boosters were originally designed at a factory in Utah. The engineers who designed them would have preferred to make them a bit fatter, but they had to be shipped by train from the factory to the launch site. The railroad line from the factory runs through a tunnel in the mountains. The rockets had to fit through the tunnel, which is slightly wider than the railroad track; and the railroad track, as you know, is about as wide as two horses’ behinds.

So, a major design feature of what is arguably the world’s most advanced transportation system was determined over two thousand years ago by the width of the rear ends of two horses.

What does all this have to do with Christian faith?

For me, it’s about the difference between a living tradition and a dead traditionalism. Jaroslav Pelikan, one of the foremost historians of Christianity, coined an aphorism in which he warned about the dangers of a narrow traditionalism for the life of the church: “Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.”

A living tradition is the lifeblood of the life of faith. Churches, mosques, synagogues, temples, and other places of faith and worship all honour different traditions. Those traditions help us to celebrate our faith. They make sense to the people who are part of that community, even if they make little or no sense to outsiders.

However, the corresponding danger is the dead traditionalism in which we simply hold on to the old ways without thinking. I believe that one of the urgent needs facing communities of faith is to find new ways of living faithfully while still honouring the traditions of our ancestors. Each new generation must find new ways in which we can speak to a new day. To paraphrase Jesus, we need new wineskins to hold the new theological wine which answers contemporary questions.

A dead, unthinking traditionalism can't do that. We might be tempted to think that the way we do things makes good sense; but honestly, we often do things a certain way because we've always done them that way. We do something once or twice, and it becomes a tradition, even when the original reason for it has passed.

The church is especially vulnerable to this. "Gimme that old time religion," sings a spiritual, because "it was good enough for" our ancestors. But that's not really so. Each new age needs to formulate its faith in a new way to meet new needs and to answer new questions. We can't just keep doing the same old things the same old way.

Tradition can be a very good thing. Traditionalism usually is pretty unhealthy. These days, we are seeing once again that the old ways don't make sense to a whole new generation of people. It's time, as I suggested last week, to rethink our identity, and the ways we live it out.

After all, we don't have to measure today's needs according to the width of two horses' hind quarters.