

6 PM - 1960s On religion and traditions

“The 1960s offered a lot to like, but recall the lyric from the 1968 musical *Hair*:

When the moon is in the Seventh House
And Jupiter aligns with Mars
Then peace will guide the planets
And love will steer the stars . . .
This is the dawning of the Age of Aquarius

“Back then, a whole generation hoped for a pivot point but Aquarius never rose beyond dawn. The stars seemed lined up in 1968 to hit the ball out of the park, but when they swung at the pitch they missed the ball. Dissatisfied with history and desperate to leave it behind, they gave up the very tool they needed to succeed. They valued individuals but never got beyond moral relativism to figure how to connect individuals together.”

“Pundits are falling all over themselves today to call today’s election a pivot point.”

“If it is, it’s not the pivot point they’re looking for. Welcome to the last gasp of the last century; another triumph of style over substance. As hip and naïve as 1968, they were as gullible then as this generation is gullible and beguiled by a voice so resonant they miss the words. They have fallen for 9th Grade poetry from Ernest Dowson, ‘I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! In my fashion.’”

“In his fashion?”

“Whatever the suitor wants his words to mean. Remember, 1968 was not all flowers and love, but also about race riots, sit-ins, Students for a Democratic Society, and anti-war activities.”

“Were race riots and student demonstrations caused by social permissiveness or were they caused by disaffection?”

“Does it matter? The Vietnam War let my generation peek under the veil. Absent a framework to justify behavior, ‘No rules’ ruled. But their pseudo-academic tolerant moral relativism ended up used against them. Cracks in their alertness opened the door for others to take down society with a slow-motion controlled explosion caused by those who worked the institutions with patience to undermine them. It didn’t matter that those revolutionaries had nothing to replace it. They could work on the naïve, of which there were many, and those naïve were more naïve than ever. Ever hear of the Cloward-Pivin Strategy?”

“No.”

“Richard Cloward and Frances Fox Piven were Columbia University academics and political activists in 1966 who proposed to manufacture a political crisis by overloading the welfare system to cause such bureaucratic pressure that the political status quo would have to change or break down.”

“Why does that apply today?”

“Because that is a political tactic in use today, along with rules for radicals by Saul Alinsky, and both are frequently associated with misrepresentations. They lie, yet does one institution today teach the ethical consequence of even a single lie? The loss of trust from a single lie means one can never, ever, believe anything that person says ever again.”

“Isn’t a candidate allowed to change his mind?”

“Is the mind changed? Is today’s position more concise, completely different, or is it a calculated recalibration of words the better to penetrate defenses? If change was made to pander to the voters to get elected, then who’s the rube?”

“Looking back at today’s journalists, products of the 1960s, they presumed their purpose was to present terrorists, whistleblowers, and everyone else the way that lawyers represent their clients, regardless of innocence or guilt, as if the journalist’s job was to impartially, and without regard to content, conduct the message of the terrorist or whistleblower to the public, and not to inject nationality, beliefs, or frame of reference.”

“That’s said with disdain.”

“Disdain well deserved. Rather than an *immoral* approach to news, this is an *amoral* approach. Because they are only doing their job, and they know no better, they would willingly claim innocence as others tear apart the fabric of society.”

“Do you take that as a legacy of the 1960s?”

“It echoes of the 1960s, but it’s a legacy of the fall of Rome after which Aristotelian rhetoric became separated from its requirement to reflect reality.”

“Is that good or bad?”

“People in the 1960s wanted something different. They were unhappy with recent events, unsettled about how to make things better, but for the most part convinced they had to try.”

“But, is that good or bad?”

“Perhaps they could be given an ‘E’ for effort. They shed many useless conventional institutions. People looked elsewhere for useful ideas. My goodness, some wonderful music started then, but people applied themselves in such peculiar ways. Other conventions lingered on. Uncertainty led to an escape to faith.”

“Faith isn’t negative.”

“Faith may work for an insular community, but faith cannot succeed with those unwilling to believe what you believe. No one can ‘faith’ someone else. If I would not bow to the faith of others, I can’t expect them to bow to mine. Religion does nothing to promote inter-cultural governance.”

“My religion matters to me.”

“And you have benefited from it. You are fortunate; others have been led astray by theirs.”

“What do you consider ‘astray?’”

“Work on that with your God-given tools.”

“How can I examine faith when faith takes a leap of faith?”

“It’s God’s existence that takes a leap of faith, but once you have bought into that, you have God-given tools to sort out God’s instructions from the noise humanity adds to it.”

“Blind faith . . .”

“. . . is the gimmick of those who would blind other people of faith.”

“So God, religion, and churches are different.”

“And raise interesting questions. How does religion bind to an individual? Did you find your religion? Did it find you? Was it a match by choice?”

“You are not prying my religion away from me.”

“If Galileo and the Copernican Revolution can eventually convince the church that planets revolve around the sun, and the church can relinquish its opinion otherwise with no loss of individual usefulness then, if without faith’s intervention one can justify civil society between two people, the church need not weigh in that it cannot be so.”

“Must there be an arbiter? And, if so, isn’t the arbiter just another religion?”

“The history of religions shows their province to be the unknowable. As human understanding of how things work has increased, as with the Copernican/Galileo revelations about the planets and stars, the boundaries of religion have receded without any loss of their authority over the remaining unknowable.”

“Religion has been long intertwined with society. Many believe social order cannot be maintained without it. My choice is to live under God’s laws.”

“Which of his laws—the ones in so many different religious books or the ones revealed from a world of experience filtered through the generations and your insight?”

“We do not learn from history.”

“Well, we search for meaning using it.”

“History is the story of forces greater than ourselves.”

“That sounds daunting. Why try at all? What can you know? How to behave? How to interact with others? That’s a much more manageable task than wrestling with forces greater than

ourselves. History is more usefully presented as a core of today's issues framed in experience. The founders of our country believed there are moral values in history to be recognized."

"Why do you have a problem with religion?"

"Some parts of some religions concern themselves with moral expression encouraged by various inducements. 'Behave this way or go to Hell; behave that way to go to Heaven.' That moral rules have been left to religion in the past does not mean that foundations for them must necessarily be religious."

"Give me an example."

"Thou shalt not commit adultery is passed down through religious tradition but there are reasons beyond the fear of God to follow that rule. One who disobeys and cheats on a spouse is cursed for a lifetime to have to edit every conversation lest one reveal one's transgression. Or consider prohibitions against relations with children where the real crime would be to cheat them out of their childhood innocence. There are plenty of non-religious reasons to follow the guidelines set down by religions and as many reasons to disregard others set down by religions. As someone said of homosexual relations, 'It will wash off.'

"If what you want in politics can only be justified in religious terms then you have found no explanation that will compel non-believers. That means politics can rightfully ignore it. To act otherwise leaves religion susceptible to be hijacked by zealots, and there is no difference between a religious zealot and a bigot."

"So much for the 'one true religion.'"

"But across the board, religious ritual does share something interesting. Confucius talked of *li*, or the proper way to live one's life. Regarding *li*, he described three types of people: Those saints who intuitively knew *the way*. The second group could learn *the way* and Confucius considered himself a member of this group. The third group he despaired would ever be able to learn *the way* and he advocated ritual for them; if you cannot learn why, learn what to do by rote.

"Orthodoxy in religion is ritual for those unable to deduce behavior for themselves. The problem is that orthodoxy can be

used or misused by charismatics to consolidate power for themselves. Religious orthodoxy—church dogma—is designed to undermine your authority to accept or reject a religion's presumption of authority over you. Unquestioned faith is called for.

"Faith is critical to religion."

"But what are the limits of faith? If a charismatic leader like Jim Jones in Jonestown, Guyana, decides that you are to drink poisoned Kool-Aid, on what basis would you oppose him? If followers of a religion decide that you must convert to their worldview, on what basis would you oppose them? Where religion is misused by charismatics to consolidate power, who but you is in a position to declare what you see?"

"What do you do when faith conflicts with faith?"

"Welcome to the multi-cultural world where, finding no answer, others would avoid the question."

"The quest for religious uniformity is equally fraught with error."

"Enforced diversity is as demeaning, dysfunctional, and divisive as enforced unity. Celebrate individuality and diversity but avoid moral relativism. Prof. John Schmidt relates that German Enlightenment philosopher Moses Mendelssohn recognized that none of us thinks like our fellow man, so we should not deceive ourselves that we do. He warned that attempting to unify religion does not create unity. It imposes equality at the expense of liberty and prevents diversity that constantly works to find a better way.

"Mendelssohn's friend, playwright Gotthold Lessing, explained in *Nathan the Wise*, the parable of the man blessed with the ring of God. The man had two identical rings made and gave the rings to his three sons who asked which of the three was the true ring. The only proof was in the practice. What makes me for you a Christian makes you for me a Jew or Muslim. But it is what they share and what differentiates them that is worth celebrating. Specific religions matter less than the humanity they sponsor."

"What did collapse in the 1960s?"

“From the 1960s, people could look back through the 1950s to survey the intellectual wreckage built up over earlier centuries. For example, Historiography, the humbling history of the study of history, had, by the 1960s, cast doubt on our understanding of why things happened.

- William Bradford’s journal ‘Of Plimoth Plantation’, from 1620 to 1647, blended fact with the belief that the community’s history was a representation of God’s will.
- Hegel watched Napoleon around 1800 and thought that history was determined by the actions of great men.
- After 1820, in the Jacksonian era, historians attributed the natural expansion of America as manifest destiny.
- Around the 1890s, in Frederick Jackson Turner’s interpretation, ‘frontier’ history, fostered a social interpretation of people forged by their circumstance.
- Between 1910 and 1913, Charles A. Beard offered a progressive interpretation that the motivating drive in history for the founding fathers had been economic self-interest and conflict. Beard’s interpretation lost influence in the 1950s when his underlying research was questioned.

“Awash in the cultural collapse mirrored in existentialism, in the 1960s, historiography lead to the chaotic conclusion that, since all previous interpretations of history had been colored by contemporaneous bias, every new interpretation of history must be relative. The 1960s generation—my generation—started to ask ‘Why?’: Why can’t I listen to this music? Why do I have to go to church? Why must I use a separate water cooler? Why are we in Vietnam? Traditions crumbled. Rules for art lost their meaning and crumbled away. Chaos appeared at every turn. Many professors of 1960s college students had had their underpinnings cut out from under them.

“In some cases there were good answers that teachers could not themselves see or express clearly. In other cases there were no considered answers. How could professors give answers—taught as they were by teachers educated in a previous generation where, when they asked ‘Why?’, they were told, ‘Because I said so.’

“It was a difficult time, threatened as people were by Communism’s slow, persistent, expansionism. School was where one learned to behave. Teachers did not learn better answers until it was too late to help my generation.”

“‘Because I said so’ shows a particularly non-useful rigidity.”

“Our grandparents’ generation, decimated in the trench warfare of World War I, was physically lost. Our generation, maturing in the 1960s, became mentally lost. Many of them, clinging to the trappings of the 1960s, remained children of the ‘60s and never grew up . . . to become today’s grown-up juveniles.”

“Nonsense. This election represents the same Camelot-like hopes and aspirations that John Kennedy’s election had in 1960.”

“If you mean fantasy-like, Camelot might be closer than you think.”

“Don’t be facetious. 1960 was a new beginning.”

“1960 was less a new beginning than hype tuned to resonate as hope for a new beginning. It was a shrewd campaign move to reinvent it as a new beginning, much like ‘Yes we can!’ and ‘Hope and Change’—clichés absent foundation, meaning, or intent to deliver.”

“Why trash intent to do better?”

“Because change has always been the American way of life. It’s built in. America was founded on change. Thirteen different colonies represented change. It’s audacious to think that one party owns change or that centralized government is the acceptable agent of change. Competition is change. Competition is change on top of change on change again. Have you no cynicism about new beginnings? A ‘new beginning’ implies there is little to be extracted from that which has gone before. It’s lazier to propose an imaginary vehicle gussied up with a spritz of ‘new car smell’ than to value what has gone before.

“A wide swath of people posture platitudes as ideals that are ill-conceived, poorly thought out, and invoked only to snow others. They are not examined or weighed because they only serve as

ammunition to damn others for not believing certain convictions. They believe in situational ethics, not ideals.”

“Why call them unexamined?”

“If they were examined, inconsistencies would cause either peals of laughter or cramps from twisted pretzel logic. Those whom progressives accuse of being unprincipled are more likely to have examined prospective ideals for soundness than are the progressives.”

“Today we have a principled candidate.”

“Principled? Name one principle.”

“The campaign is full of principles: diversity, empathy, tolerance.”

“Platitudes aren’t principles. Clichés aren’t principles; they are used to avoid principles.”

“The slogans represent principles.”

“Slogans represent beliefs.”

“Beliefs are principles. Compassion is more than a belief. We want to take care of the poor.”

“If one understood compassion for the poor, one wouldn’t lead them on, doling out stolen dollars to keep them beholden but never training them to earn real money on their own. A party whose campaign bypasses understanding to get you to believe manipulates to gain power. What they call principles are convenient fictions. They cannot list bedrock principles or explain why they might hold them—and neither can you.”

“It’s too easy to make that allegation but that doesn’t prove lack of principles.”

“Principled people value clarity. A campaign to insert noise as camouflage reveals it does not value society and would destroy that society for temporary private advantage.”

“Idealism does matter. Someone has to retain ideals.”

“Idealism? Living by principles instead of caving in to realism? Where do these ideals come from? Ideals don’t arrive in full bloom, do they?”

“No, they don’t.”

“When picking ideals, how does one know a false bloom from the real thing?”

“I know it when I see it.”

“Take peace for instance. Is peace an ideal?”

“I believe it is. Peace is preferable to war.”

“So you’d rather leave people oppressed to preserve peace? Is that your ideal?”

“No, but you can’t fight just because you’re the one who thinks something is right.”

“‘Right’ is a red herring, not an issue. Peace isn’t the absence of war; it is the absence of the *need* for war. Peace is a process—a commitment to problem resolution that leaves war unnecessary. ‘Give peace a chance’ is a slogan that short-circuits thought before it can find a principle. Where do real ideals come from?”

“Ideals are like natural laws.”

“Herodotus wrote frequently about respect for the values of others, but which ones? Whose natural laws? Yours or the ‘natural laws’ the other side believes?”

“If not natural laws, then what?”

“Ideas with potential begin as wisdom distilled from hard experience. What is distilled is used to project different futures. Some imagined futures would be silly—Utopian models that collapse, unworkable even in dreams. Others show potential. Projections, tested for plausibility against both the past and future, propose paths to work until fresh experience teaches us otherwise.

“One would have thought that those in the 1960s might have known what foolish ideas shysters convinced them to flirt with. But even today old fossil advocates of the same silly ideas have yet to be unmasked, so we need better wisdoms to replace the

conventional ones.”

“You want better conventional wisdoms?”

“The teachers of 1960s students had had the underpinnings of education cut out from under them, and yet were obliged to teach something. These teachers taught in a world resonating with expanding media. Marshall McLuhan, a rhetorician who wrote *The Medium is the Message* in 1967, warned of media’s cognitive effects. Media-driven Post-modernism deals with self-reference, a single label with multiple interpretations, including one purely about style. Self-reference can also apply to poseurs and posturing. Assuming a lag between the philosophy and the literature, and between the literature and the culture, Post-modernism dawdled along for the last 50 to 75 years. Nietzsche to Joyce, to Woolf, to Sartre, to everything we currently live. We are *still* in the Post-modern era because, plumbing the depths of our shallowness, we cast desperately about trying to find a way out. We are, as Post-modern writer John Barth titled his 1968 book, *Lost in the Funhouse*.”

“Students at the end of the 1960s were lost. Their professors, educated 10 to 30 years earlier were lost. They had no place to go for their history, philosophy, literature, or art. Society is fragile, as *Clockwork Orange* by Anthony Burgess, argued in 1962, when it examined whether depth of culture brings morality. We are at the mercy of our thoughts and the thoughts of others. Post-modernism arguably peaked in 1961 with Joseph Heller’s *Catch 22* although that peak was more a valley because Heller described the problem, not the solution. Like Bob Dylan’s 1968 lyric from *All along the Watchtower*, Heller despaired, “There must be some way out of here!”

“But suppose the media and the message are inextricably tied together. The art doesn’t exist if the media doesn’t exist.”

“Yes and no. You, the artist, are caught in what appears to be a deadly embrace, with no way out. Then, someone says, “Stop. Take a breath. Step out of it. Instantly you have gone ‘meta’—traveled to another level. That is not intractable.”

“To be sure. If I say you have lost focus you are instantly snapped back, and, now focused, typically are convinced you never lost it. That’s the purpose of writing. Ideas nailed to page can be examined in the cold harsh light of the dawn. That is one purpose of art. All it takes is a change of mind that can be accomplished in an instant.”

“Who defines society? Who watches over it? Can society be protected? Is it protected from the center, from the edge, or must it be protected from above?”

“Who the hell has the answer?”

“You do.”