

Traditionalism and Its Modifiers

Mordecai Roshwald

WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP of religion to conservatism, or to the respect for and veneration of tradition? Let us explore this issue through specific examples.

In Judaism, regarded as the oldest monotheistic religion, the respect for tradition is overwhelming. Jewish holy days, observances, rituals, and code of conduct look back in veneration at traditional practices, which are largely rooted or consciously attributed to biblical foundations.

The sacred books of the Hebrew Bible—predominantly the Pentateuch, or the five books of Moses—have been cherished for some three millennia. The text has been scrupulously copied from one generation to another. Thus, a copy of the book of Isaiah found among the Dead Sea scrolls, which is some two-thousand years old, is virtually identical with the contemporary text. The sacrosanct Torah scrolls, copied by hand for use in the synagogue, could hardly be less exactly transcribed. To preserve and conserve the ancient holy text in the original form is of paramount significance.

MORDECAI ROSHWALD is Professor Emeritus of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Minnesota. He is the author of *The Transient and the Absolute and most recently Liberty: Its Meaning and Scope* (2001).

It is not only the respect for the antique as such, but also the belief that the ancient text contains the original word of God, which makes it of paramount significance. Consequently, there is an implicit assumption that the closer in time the interpreters and sages are to the divine revelation, the more authoritative their explanation and interpretation of the holy scriptures. Moses is the first intermediary of the divine pronouncements, and the successive generations of interpreters, commentators, expositors of law seem to lose some of the original potency of the word of God. Consequently, every generation of legislative and juridical interpreters of the divine teaching has to justify its commentaries by reference to earlier generations and former sages. It is as if the rays of light have been weakened by travelling through space, so that one has had to overcome the entropy by a deliberate effort to recollect and document the earlier sources.

This stance, however, has not resulted in the ossification of religious practice and institutions. For although the prophets, and later the various generations of scholars and sages, consistently venerated the Torah (Pentateuch), they actually often took the liberty to add to the Law as new circumstances arose, or to modify some of the harsher command-

ments. Yet, the rabbinical interpreters insisted that their work was actually a commentary of the divine teaching, claiming that some of this teaching had been transmitted to Moses orally and preserved from one generation to another. Hence, a way was established to allow and facilitate religious development, while preserving the overall reverence for tradition. Conservatism could coexist with cautious modifications accumulating through the ages.

Moreover, if looked at from a theological and not merely a historical perspective, one can discern a non-conservative element—indeed a crucial one—in the self-perception of Judaism. The pivotal event in the establishment of the Israelite way of life is the Covenant between the tribes of Israel and the Lord, concluded at Mount Sinai. According to its terms, the children of Israel will be cherished and protected by God and become “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation,” if they will obey the Lord’s commandments (Exodus 19:5-6). The essence of these imperatives are the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:2-17).

The establishment of Judaism is linked to a divine revelation and an agreement between God and Israel, which is perceived to have taken place in a moment in history. Such an occurrence is in itself not the manifestation of conservatism, but, on the contrary, a radical departure from earlier established ways. The conservative attitude which followed the exceptional event is founded on an unprecedented happening. (To be sure, earlier revelations to individuals like Moses, and originally to Abraham and his son and grandson, had taken place, but even so there must be a first revelation which *is* revolutionary.)

Moreover, the exceptional event on which Judaism is founded is not limited to the past. For another belief of future salvation, of future bliss of the righteous, of national redemption and universal

peace, is expressed in eschatological prophecies and their subsequent rabbinical elaborations. These beliefs, often linked to the appearance of a Messiah, balance the veneration of the past with the anticipation of a perfect future. In a sense, they could be seen as complementing the past-oriented conservatism with a future-oriented progressivism.

In summation, the relationship between religion and conservatism in Judaism is a peculiar combination and interaction between looking backward and accommodation to change, and essentially embracing and elaborating on the great innovative moment in the past. This moment becomes a holy event, which has to be preserved and venerated, and thus becomes the focus of subsequent conservatism. At the same time, the belief in eschatological salvation, a future resolution of all afflictions and troubles, lends another, teleological dimension to the traditional belief.

Christianity, as it grew from its Judaic roots, exhibits some parallel—if not identical—traits when looked at from the present perspective. The Christian churches—primarily the Roman Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox—look to the past practices for guidance and emulation, and are weary of demands for innovation and reform. All Christian churches, by definition, look to a historical-theological event as being crucial for their belief: The life and death of Jesus, and the consequences for the personal salvation of the believers, are not less important to the Christians than the Covenant at Sinai is to Jews. Moreover, the evidence for the historical authenticity of Jesus is more substantial than the evidence of the Sinai revelation—perhaps because Jesus lived more than a thousand years later.

Still, it is noteworthy that Christianity witnessed some revolutionary internal changes—the breaks with certain traditional beliefs and rituals—of which the

innovations of various Protestant churches and sects have offered a recorded testimony. Judaism, too, has experienced some such schisms during its long history—sects at the time of Jesus, the Karaites a millennium later—but essentially it has preserved its traditional unity. (This unity may have been questioned by developments in the last two centuries.) Christianity, though it sees in Jesus the Christ, that is to say the Messiah, and thus differs from the Judaic anticipation of the Deliverer, retains the belief in the Second Coming, and thus resembles Judaism in complementing the reliance on the past with the anticipation of a novel future.

While religious belief—despite the innovative elements—generally speaking blends with traditionalism and conservatism, and the two are mutually supportive, it is noteworthy that in the United States there is a strong tendency to radical innovation in the sphere of religion. For example, the Mormon and the Christian Science churches emerged out of fairly recent revelations and have become established as respectable branches of Christianity. The penchant for novelty, as contrasting with tradition, continues with vigor, and often assumes the shape of esoteric cults. Some of these transcend the confines of sanity, as in the case of believers who sell their homes and possessions in their trust of imminent Kingdom of Heaven, or in the instance of sects committing mass suicide assisted by murder.

Less menacing and more typical are the liberties which priests, pastors, and

rabbis take to make the religious services more attuned to modern times, an attitude which conservative believers condemn. The latter disapprove of such practices, because they are at variance with tradition, which is highly valued by orthodox believers, and because they undermine the unity of the church.

Yet the innovative attitude appeals to people who are eager for change and see in it progress, and whose reverence for tradition is rather superficial. The prevalence of this trend in the United States may be attributed to the general belief in progress and the anti-conservative tendencies typical of a country of immigrants who have severed their ties with their countries of origin in order to find or to establish a better future for themselves. One may speculate that the trend to replace machines and gadgets ever so often has carried over, to some degree, into the domain of religion.

Essentially, conservatism is not the *product* of religion, but an *independent* factor in human disposition, thriving in one civilization more than in another. Thus, in Great Britain conservatism is expressed in political institutions: monarchy has survived the democratization of Britain, and so has the House of Lords. The power has shifted to the democratically elected Parliament, but the formal status of the once powerful institutions has been preserved. There are, of course, many other aspects of civilization—in education, in business, in family relations, as well as in religion—which are affected or colored by conservative attitudes in the “old country.”