

Where is the Fiddler?

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*... the university is committed to the development of the student
...within the living Catholic tradition ...*

In 1964, the musical *Fiddler on the Roof* made its appearance. Based on eight short stories by Sholem Aleichem (sometimes called the Jewish Mark Twain), it features Tevye the dairyman, his wife Golde, their five daughters, and the townspeople of Anatevka, a small Russian village. The time is 1905 (about the same time the original stories were written), the last years of the tsars, and a time of continuing Jewish pogroms.

The fiddler of the title is not found in the stories of Sholem Aleichem, but he does appear in the paintings of Marc Chagall at the same time of the Tevye stories and continuing into the 1920s. One in particular – *Green Violinist* – portrays the fiddler dangling in space over the roofs of a peasant village. Chagall inserted the figure of a violinist in a number of other paintings, whether the subject was birth, marriage, or death. The real violinist was an integral part of Russian Jewish life at the turn of the century, traditionally involved with landmark events in a person's life, and the use of a fiddler thus provided an appropriate metaphor for human destiny and the maintaining of tradition in the musical. He is present at the beginning, and at the end, and at each significant event in the story. He appears from nowhere; he is mute; he disappears; he reappears. He is a reminder of what is really important in the life of the community.

Tevye is an easy-going, hard-working individual who loves to talk and also loves to share the traditions of his people with the audience. Most of the audiences who saw this musical over the years in various countries probably had little idea of what the traditions of orthodox Jewry were. Tevye is aware of this, and begins his story by telling the audience what place each person has in the village. As he explains the role of the fathers, the mothers, the sons, the daughters, the tailor, the butcher, the beggar, the matchmaker, the rabbi, and all the others, it is said that their roles are determined to a great extent by "Tradition," which also happens to be the title of the opening musical number.

As the story unfolds, the observer is treated to a number of traditions – a Sabbath service in the home, a wedding before a rabbi, a bottle dance performed by men only as part of the festivities following the wedding. To an outsider, there is amazement at the intricacy of the little traditions – the gesture, the article of clothing – and they begin to appear superficial. However, the popularity of the musical did not rely upon the audience learning the customs of the orthodox Jew, but rather the fact that many people began to think about their own traditions. When it played in Tokyo, one member of the audience was astounded that an American audience could understand it, because it was so "Japanese."

Traditions are beliefs, stories, or customs that are handed on from one generation to another, often in an oral fashion. At times, the original meaning of a tradition may be lost to memory, but it is carried on anyway. Some traditions, however, are at the very core of a belief system, and are integral to the continuance of the community. Other traditions can be updated on occasion to accommodate a more "modern" time.

The story of *Fiddler* is based around tradition. What happens when traditions are not followed? The three older daughters in Tevye's family are married in the course of the book, and each of them "breaks" with a tradition. Furthermore, each of them in succession breaks a more serious tradition. The eldest daughter refuses to marry the elderly wealthy widower chosen for her by the matchmaker (and agreed to by her father), and instead marries a poor young man with whom she has been in love. Although problematic for the family, this break with tradition is salvageable. She is allowed to have the traditional wedding ceremony with the entire village celebrating. And of course the fiddler appears to take his place.

The second daughter also wishes to marry the man of her choice. He, however, is considered a revolutionary by the government, and must flee the village to escape prosecution. She chooses to follow him and be married away from home and family. The third daughter, who like the others marries for love, does the unthinkable and chooses a gentile. This break with tradition is far too serious for Tevye, and he disowns her. Tevye begins to contemplate what this is all about. Love, it seems (at least with his daughters), is more powerful than long-held traditions. Traditions for one generation are not necessarily the traditions of a new generation.

The story ends with a pogrom being carried out. The villagers pack up whatever they can carry, and Tevye proclaims that wherever they end up, they will make do. His family, along with the villagers of Anatevka, is dispersed. They will never all meet again. Some are going to other parts of Europe, and some to the United States. As the fiddler is seen joining the procession, one has the feeling that there are still traditions that will bind them together. The individual families will maintain some old traditions and adapt others to their new communities.

For an outsider to orthodox Jewry, *Fiddler on the Roof* can be a fascinating experience, because it represents a very different way of life. Having grown up with Catholic traditions in the 1940s and 50s, there is, however, a certain resonance. The situations were different, but the sense of tradition was very strong. Being Catholic meant church every Sunday, no meat on Friday, fasting during Lent (with at least three Sundays sermons preceding Lent to explain the rules), novenas, private devotions, praying in Latin, and lots of symbolism which often was not explained. Changing some of those traditions caused a fair amount of anxiety. Moving the Holy Saturday service from early in the morning to an Easter Vigil needed a lot of explanation. And many did not like the idea. (After all, the tradition of a midnight mass was reserved for Christmas.) The ceremony for a mixed marriage (which was sometimes termed "marrying outside the church" and was considered as unacceptable as Tevye's third daughter), which had been

performed in the rectory or the sacristy, was allowed in church – but outside the communion rail.

By the late 1960s, in the aftermath of Vatican II, everything seemed to be changing. Priests became celebrants (later presiders) and faced the congregation, which for its part was expected to respond to prayers and to sing. All this praying and singing was to be in the vernacular language of the country. (For those who saw Latin as a unifying symbol of the church, this was problematic, but it actually meant that very few people in any country could understand what was being said.) Communion rails and statues began to disappear from the churches. Fasting was downplayed. Friday abstinence was abrogated. The communion fast was radically shortened, and the wafer itself could even be taken in the communicant's own hand. Novenas were gone. The Mass, now the Eucharistic liturgy, was central, along with the Divine Office. (Although the Office of the Hours and the Mass have been the two public prayers of the church for centuries, the Office is probably known by as few Catholics today as it was at the beginning of this century.) All the traditions were going fast, and to some the Catholic church was looking more and more Protestant. Somehow, by the mid-1990s, the church has survived. It is different looking now than it was in mid-century. The fiddler is in a different place.

What is the "living Catholic tradition?" In the mid-20th century, the American Catholic was a legalistic machine. If one followed all the rules, and memorized all the answers in the Baltimore catechism, one was a good Catholic. The aberrant uncle who never went to church on Sunday, ate meat on Friday, and swore a blue streak, but went weekly to light a candle before the statue of his favorite saint (and was thereby disdained by the rest of the family), may have had a better handle on his faith life than did his relatives. Once the rules were changed, the legalistic Catholic had little on which to rely. As a result, a number of Catholics today feel that "everything has changed," and to a certain extent, that may be true. But it is true only if the defining traditions of Catholic culture are limited to superficial traditions.

Many church-related colleges and universities are examining their roots and traditions these days to try to find a way to remain church-related. As David Hassel points out, many originally church-related institutions have simply forsaken those traditions and relationships, and become secular. This seems to be particularly true with many schools in which the religious founding group (RFG) was a Protestant denomination. Most of those founded by Catholic orders and dioceses remain at least nominally Catholic. But what happens when the RFG itself changes and the institution is left to determine its own place in the scheme of things?

A number of Lutheran colleges throughout the country are having conversations similar to those found on Catholic campuses. Many of these institutions were not only church-related, but also received operating subsidies from the denomination. More often than not, those sources of funding have long since disappeared. To complicate matters, whereas the Swedish Lutherans (Lutheran Church of America [LCA]) founded Gustavus Adolphus College, and the Norwegian Lutherans (American Lutheran Church [ALC]) founded St. Olaf College, those two synods have now become a single unit (Evangelical

Lutheran Church of America [ELCA]). What is either college's allegiance to this new entity? Or is there a deeper strain of Lutheranism which can transcend synodal differences?

For those Catholics who would say that the changes in the church are as significant as merging synods was for the Lutherans, it may be impossible for them to imagine that a Catholic university could be anything different from the one they attended thirty or forty years ago. I believe that is where the "living" part of the tradition becomes important. There is no doubt that a number of traditions have been changed or left behind to history. But are they the superficial or the integral traditions? Have some things changed because it was necessary for them to change? If Catholicism is still intact, it is our job to find out where the fiddler went.

Catholicism is founded on Scripture and tradition. For a long time, American Catholics were not strong in the Scripture department, and relied very heavily on the tradition component. But eventually, those traditions which were handed down from parent to child, and were reinforced by the teaching sisters and brothers in the parochial school, tended toward the legalistic and the devotional. If a young Catholic were to ever find another side to Catholicism, it might not happen until the college or university level. There, for the first time, one might come into contact with Augustine and Aquinas, and the concepts of reason and revelation. For some, this was a heady experience – to find that there was indeed an intellectual side to this religion. As more and more young Catholics have attended post-secondary schools as a matter of course, the easier it should be for them to accept the changes in emphasis which Vatican II espoused. But the years following that church council had another significant impact on the life of the church. Fewer and fewer young people entered religious life and the priesthood. Many parochial schools were closed, and those that remained – elementary, secondary, and post-secondary – were staffed almost exclusively by lay people.

The founder of the University of St. Thomas was Archbishop John Ireland, and by extension, the church of the archdiocese. Most Catholic institutions of higher learning were founded and staffed by religious orders. Since Ireland staffed the original school mostly with the clergy from the archdiocese, the school was much more closely aligned to the founding of the Protestant schools – a church leader with vision and a faculty of clerics. Perhaps John Ireland was more of a visionary than anyone imagined. One of his main goals in establishing

St. Thomas was to educate the laity to take an active role in the church. Since Vatican II, the laity have assumed positions within the church that would never have been dreamed of, even at mid-century. The fact that the church has survived this last third of a century speaks well for Ireland's desire to educate the laity.

If the superficial traditions have been modified, the more significant traditions – particularly those intellectual ones – remain. If the religious orders who always seemed to be in charge of the education process have diminished in number, the laity have assumed that role. If the Catholic university is the transmitter of these traditions, it becomes

incumbent for the faculty and staff to accept the charge. The staffing of any university is probably never going to be from one faith denomination, and indeed, if it is to be a "university," that would not be desirable. Besides, any church-related institution is better off with the intellectually curious non-adherent, than with the church member who is disgruntled with the denomination. Those who are willing to pass on a tradition need not have been born in the faith.

John Paul II in *Ex corde ecclesiae* (I.A.1.13.) presents four essential characteristics for a Catholic university:

1. A Christian inspiration not only of individuals but of the university community as such;
2. A continuing reflection in the light of the Catholic faith upon the growing treasury of human knowledge, to which it seeks to contribute by its own research;
3. Fidelity to the Christian message as it comes to us through the church;
4. An institutional commitment to the service of the people of God and of the human family in their pilgrimage to the transcendent goal which gives meaning to life.

The second point is particularly relevant to this discussion, because, like John Ireland's vision statements, it indicates a changing society.

Augustine and Aquinas are often used as the guides for understanding the intellectual side of Catholic tradition. However, with their eight century differential, they did not always agree with one another. And another eight centuries have passed since Aquinas. Each of them obviously wrote for the people of his own time, and each of them has been interpreted for people of later times. Augustine wrote in the time of barbarian invasions, and the hordes had literally arrived at his door when he died. Aquinas provided a very logical summary of doctrine (based on Aristotelian premises) that could be used against the medieval heresies of his time. How can this tradition be passed on as relevant to a later generation?

Traditions are built from a past but cannot be replicated. Traditions that are not re-energized become stale and boring. Shakespeare and Mozart were very popular in their day with a wide variety of the populace, but replicating them in the 20th century finds a much more elite audience. What they had to say in their respective art forms is just as valid today, but it is not the common currency. People living in the first half of this century would have spoken of living through a world war or the Great Depression. People in the late 20th century are as likely to define themselves in terms of the Beatles, Guns & Roses, the Sex Pistols, Prince, Pearl Jam, or Nirvana. The real challenge to maintaining any kind of tradition today is to keep pace with an ever-changing and quickly changing global society. Is there a place for the Catholic tradition? Of course. The fiddler is always somewhere. It is our job to find him.