

When Does Tradition Become Tyranny?

Traditions emerge for a reason. Society is impossible without them. Traditions provide lenses, rules, norms, and expectations that help make sense of the world, harmonize competing aims and interests, provide stability, and enable long-term planning.

But tradition can be tyrannical. Traditions can oppress, restrict, stagnate, and destroy individuals and society.

So where's the line? When does tradition become tyranny?

I offer simple test for the tyranny of a tradition. Does it rely on violence? When those who would deviate from tradition are threatened with violence, or a tradition must initiate violence to sustain itself, it has become tyrannical. The beneficial aspects of the tradition are now outweighed by the harm in its maintenance or expansion.

Imagine a deeply religious society, in which a strong tradition of weekly church attendance has emerged. Whatever you think of this tradition, it's not tyrannical so long as attendance is voluntary. When that society begins to mandate church attendance, or prohibit other activities during services, the tradition has moved to the dark side and become tyrannical.

Some liberators come along to break the chains of the tradition-turned-tyranny. They succeed in ending the use of violence to support religious activity. In the process, they gain considerable power and social standing as leaders of the secular revolution. In time, the tradition of churchgoing strengthens once again, and more and more people choose to attend. The secular revolutionaries, now threatened by the peaceful emergence of the formerly deposed tradition, employ violence in repressing it. Church attendance is illegal, in order to support their "liberal" aims.

This hypothetical illustrates that the tyranny of a tradition has nothing to do with the tradition itself, nor do the intentions of those who support or oppose tradition determine whether it's tyrannical. Again, when violence is relied upon to force a tradition - even if the tradition is the rejection of older traditions - it has become tyranny.

Transition into tyranny is not always so visible and obvious, because the state obfuscates violence. In state legal codes or edicts, violence is slathered with noble intentions and shiny rhetoric, and the perpetrators are several steps removed from the advocates.

Traditions upheld by state violence are harder to identify, but they're tyrannical nonetheless. When money is forcibly extracted from people and used to subsidize a tradition, for example, it's moving decidedly in the tyrannical direction. It may be a small tyranny at first, but it's tyranny.

Anything from educational traditions and institutions, norms around work, language, or movements in art, when they accept the succulent temptation of government largess, cease to be noble traditions and become tyrannies. Accepting the fruits of violence positions a tradition to rely on violence to maintain its power. Ironically, the stronger the violence used to maintain a tradition, the weaker the tradition. Strong traditions don't need boots on necks to survive or spread.

If you advocate a tradition, resisting the temptation of the violent fruits dangled in front of you – whether state subsidy, mandate, or prohibition – is necessary for preventing its morph into tyranny.

So long as it's poisoned with violent supports, it's impossible to know the true worth of a tradition.

A great many good traditions have been turned tyrannical because they follow the allure of ill-gotten gains.