

What Are The Good Old Days?  
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In final exams given to my World History classes, the last question was: \223If you had a time machine, which culture in the past would you choose to live in\227and why would you choose it?\224 Then came part 2: \223 If you had to gamble on being female rather than a male, slave rather than upper class, would you still choose that culture?\224

They all got it. The good old days were not good for everyone, and those cultures that had the largest number of unfortunate people were the very worst. Few of us would take a chance on living in Medieval Europe or in Afghanistan or Somalia today. There is no time in history\227including even our own in the past\227when one would not have to gamble on being lucky to have a good life there.

The Governor of Virginia recently proposed \223Confederacy Month\224 for his state\227to remember and honor its history before and during the Civil War. He is correct that Virginia had an elegant pre-Civil War history (most important founding fathers, a graceful aristocratic culture, and most important Civil War battlefields). But his proposal ran into a firestorm of outrage when he failed to mention their \223little problem\224\227slavery. Apparently the governor and many like him are tired of being bashed for their appalling history of slavery and want to celebrate the better elements of their culture. But they cannot sweep that one under the carpet.

He obviously needed to take my final exam question\227part 2. If he were born during the Confederacy a poor white male, a poor white female, or black of either gender, would he want to live there?

But this takes us back to the whole issue of tradition: the love of everything that one\222s ancestors did, which is the basis of nearly every human religion and many other human institutions. I have always wondered what we think that our ancestors knew that we do not know today\227and how many things we know today that our ancestors never even contemplated\227such as:

\225 Women are not a separate species who must be suppressed or killed, if necessary (honor killings).

\225 Domestic violence or incest is not just a private male privilege.

\225 Race is a concept based on the ill-founded notion that superficial differences are also qualitative differences.

\225 The sun and planets do not revolve around a flat earth.

\225 Kings are not anointed by God to rule over us.

\225 Sons and daughters are not the property of their fathers who may execute them if they choose.

\225 Witches, fortune tellers, homosexuals, or albinos are not to be stoned, tortured, or burned.

\225 Torture is not an accepted and necessary tool of the judiciary.

\225 People who abandon their hereditary religion are not criminals to be murdered.

If you look hard at these ideas, you may see that some cultures today still believe such things and carry out such punishments. But ours should not be so benighted.

It is understandable that many Americans today are troubled by the too-rapid pace of change and long for an imagined stable past. I certainly admire the Founding Fathers\227and also admire the Ten Commandments. However, could we live entirely with the values of those times? Whatever the Founding Fathers thought, they still gave women no more rights than children and closed their eyes to the embarrassment and horror of slavery. A person with today\222s values could not in all seriousness support such \223strict constructionism,\224 as if time had stood still and our values have not improved.

And as much as I admire the Ten Commandments, they are a guide to morality but cannot

replace modern law, nor can they deal with issues never thought of millennia ago. Do we believe any more that the earth is flat and is the center of the universe? Had those ancient writers conceived of a world in which we have the ability to journey to the moon?

For all lovers of tradition, try my exam question, Part 2, and see if you would take such a risk.

683 words

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