

# **Continuity and Change:**

## **Easter as a Blended Holiday**

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*This article is the twenty-sixth in a series about economics and holidays.*

Christians celebrate Easter on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the spring equinox, which means that it is a movable feast. It is, of course, a celebration of the resurrection of Jesus, but it has a lot of customs and traditions associated with it that appear to make little sense in terms of being connected to the passion story. Many of these customs and traditions were transposed from celebrations of the spring equinox in other faith traditions. The name of the holiday itself is of pagan origin, the Old English Oestre or the Germanic Ostara, goddess of the dawn.

Eggs were used by the ancient Persians and Egyptians to celebrate their new year, which was in spring. Colored eggs originated there, but have been adopted by many European countries, including the Faberge eggs of the Russian czars and the egg hunts that are common in the United States today. Eggs represent new life, and it was easy to transfer that meaning from the Persian and Egyptian new year to renewal in the resurrection.

Sunrise service? According to some traditions, earth-centered traditions greeted the spring equinox at dawn, the summer solstice at midday (picnic, anyone?), the fall equinox at dusk (transplanted to the timing of trick or treat on Hallowe'en), and the winter solstice at midnight (as in midnight mass).

Rabbits and bonnets? In Norse tradition, the rabbit was sacred to the goddess Freya, a fertility goddess, and spring is a time of fertility. New clothes were also part of Northern European customs at the spring equinox, even as the earth itself put on new garments of leaves and flowers.

Food? Hot cross buns may appear to be about the cross, but they too represent a pre-Christian custom. They were eaten year round as a symbol of the division of the year into four equal quarters or seasons marked by the solstices and equinoxes. Lamb was the traditional food for Passover, the Jewish holiday that was in full swing at the time of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. So Easter is a very eclectic holiday in the form of its observances, even if it is imbued with highly Christian-specific meaning and significance.

While the central story of Christianity is more or less unique, the customs—the times, the places, the forms of celebration—associated with Easter (and also Christmas) have been borrowed or appropriated from older faith traditions and folk practices, often re-interpreted in terms of the Christian story. In that way, this faith tradition represents both continuity and change—continuing the old customs, but changing the central story and its meaning for people's spiritual lives.

What does economics have to say about the value of continuity and change? It would appear that economics comes down heavily on the side of change—innovation, competition, mobility, new products, new skills. All of these kinds of change offer new opportunities for consumption, for careers, for starting new businesses, for identifying new markets. Dynamic is the way we describe an economy where change is not only accepted but welcomed and encouraged.

But change is often easier to live with and adapt to when it takes place in a familiar context of rules and expectations. When change means uncertainty, people may be less willing to take risks, try new products, explore new career possibilities, invest in emerging enterprises and products. They will be more resistant to change. So a familiar context of customs and rules, whether it is property rights or pension guarantees or bank deposit insurance, is a necessary backdrop to change.

Economics is focused on the operation of markets, but markets do not exist without a context that needs to be stable in order to create an environment that is favorable to investment and innovation. Change is often good, and so is the capacity to adapt to change. Putting new ideas and new products into a familiar context makes them easier to accept. So the primary role of government is to provide that stable environment, to define and enforce property rights, to guarantee the security of the financial system, to protect citizens against enemies foreign and domestic, and to provide the public infrastructure that supports economic activity of all kinds. In a market system, the private sector is the agent of change, while the public sector is the source of context and continuity. When it works well, that's a pretty good division of responsibility.

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