

Republican Perspective

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When in Rome....

Do you wear shoes in your home? No one in my family wears shoes in my home or in their own. It's our custom. Visitors usually follow suit.

It's also the custom in some Asian countries and in Hawaii to leave one's shoes at the door. And it's becoming more common in "the contiguous 48." So what to do when you go to someone else's home. Shoes or no shoes? Well, the solution is to follow the custom of your host. If shoes are acceptable, leave them on. If it's a no-shoe house, go shoe-less. Common sense.

Similarly if you were visiting Japan, for example, you would leave your shoes at the door. You would never, I hope, think that the fact that you wear shoes in your own home should privilege you to wear shoes in your Japanese host's home. The local custom takes precedence.

Of course wearing shoes (or going shoeless) in the house is not the real subject here. It's just an illustration of a commonly held principle: people the world around generally accept and follow the primacy of local custom.

Which brings us to another example of campus craziness---perpetrated not by the students, but by the school administration. Campusreform.org reports on Clemson University's diversity training program for its faculty. To drum up attendance, Clemson's Office of Inclusion and Equity offered mugs and t-shirts for faculty members who completed the online "inclusion awareness course."

The training features diversity-related fictitious scenarios from which participants are to select the most inclusive response. Here's an example.

"Alejandro scheduled a 9:00 a.m. meeting with two groups of visiting professors and students from other countries. When he arrived, he found the first group had been waiting for 15 minutes. The second group arrived at 9:10."

What should Alejandro do? The incorrect answer, of course, is for him to explain to the tardy arrivals that "in our country 9:00 a.m. means 9:00 a.m." The correct answer is that

he “should recognize cultural differences...and adjust accordingly.” The explanation is that “time may be considered precise or fluid, depending on the culture.” So Alejandro should recognize “that his cultural perspective regarding time is neither more nor less valid than any other.”

Notice what has happened here. Alejandro is the host. In his country (the U.S., since Clemson is in South Carolina) “9:00 a.m. means 9:00 a.m.” But the diversity training encourages faculty to ignore the primacy of local custom and accept instead that it “is neither more nor less valid than any other.”

As a consequence, members of the tardy group in this fictitious scenario do not learn the local custom and of course are not expected to follow it---and they presumably have no clue they have been discourteous to the members of the on-time group and the host. If there’s to be a second meeting, I wonder how the fictional and likely frustrated Alejandro will go about scheduling it?

The anonymous Clemson faculty member who alerted campusreform.org had this to say: “I’m appalled that Clemson thought it was necessary to ‘encourage’ its employees to take this course. I can only guess the number of productivity hours the University lost while faculty and staff suffered through the infuriating, biased, laughable examples.”

The Alejandro scenario dismisses the primacy of local custom. Shoes in the house or not? Show up on time or not? Ignoring (or unaware of) the wisdom of the ages, Clemson’s Office of Inclusion and Equity says it doesn’t matter: all perspectives are equally valid.

Paraphrasing St. Augustine, who bequeathed us the correct answer some 17 centuries ago: When in Rome, I do as the Romans do. It is polite and avoids conflict.