Random Thoughts 5

# When in Rome

The adage “When in Rome do as the Romans do” has the same meaning as the Japanese expression 郷に入っては郷に従え. Both mean that it is advisable to follow the conventions of the area in which you are residing or visiting. It is both a courtesy to the inhabitants of the area as well as a way of learning and understanding it better. Whether this advice is followed or not is to me an indication of an individual’s sophistication and intelligence. Those in whom these qualities are evident do make an effort to conform and understand. In those in whom the qualities are lacking, they appear to be ignorant, boorish, and ill-mannered; their behavior often annoying and irritating. Sadly today it seems that the latter type of foreign visitor is more prevalent than the former.

I think the problem is even more serious in the case of immigrants who make no effort to conform to their host country but instead insist upon maintaining their own culture values and customs. The most obvious example of this is Muslims in Europe and America who insist upon being allowed to behave according to their beliefs even though they conflict with local mores. Perhaps more than any other major religious group they seem to be the most intolerant of different beliefs and customs and aggressive in their determination to impose their ways on the local inhabitants. That is wrong and should not be tolerated or allowed.

My family immigrated to America in 1861 from Norway and they made every effort to conform. Not teaching their children Norwegian but insisting on them learning and using only English was typical of immigrants from Europe at that time and later. True, elements of the culture of the old country, such as food, were retained, but these were kept in the home or displayed on certain occasions. Never was there an effort to make other Americans adapt to them. This was also true of other ethnic groups. We were proud of our heritage, be it Scandinavian, Italian, German, or any other country, but always our sense and pride of being American superseded that pride.

A current issue of debate in Japan is the proposition to increase the number of foreign workers by making it easier for them to immigrate. The shortage of labor in certain areas is the reason behind this. My main concern with this proposal is whether those immigrants who will be admitted to Japan will be able to “do as the Romans do” or try to preserve and impose their cultures and values on everyone else.