

The tyranny of hat etiquette



By Bill Kilpatrick

PHILLIP TREACY ONCE quipped that, "How a hat makes you feel is what a hat is all about," and hats, for me any way, make me confused and angry. Well, let me be more clear, hat etiquette, that is. There is a gnawing question for me that has gone unanswered for many years and that's: why is wearing a hat sometimes considered disrespectful? I have asked people at multiple Royal Canadian Legions for example and the answer is always, "You remove your hat out of respect." But when I push it a little further and ask why wearing a hat is considered disrespectful, the answer revolves around what I consider a non-answer: "It just is," or they answer that it is a "tradition," "ritual," or they say "it's just always been that way." The same goes for being at the dinner table, why is it disrespectful to leave your hat on? Equally stupid is the rule about elbows on the table. Why? They make no sense. I heard someone invoke royalty as an excuse to remove your hat the other day or rather being in a place of royalty like a council chamber, or court of law. However, when I question people about this bizarre ongoing ritual, the more the answer eludes me. No one seems to know where this notion of a hat being disrespectful actually comes from, nor why we have clung to, what I'm going to call, hat discrimination. I'm calling it discrimination because the rules are not consistent, are often contradictory, and are frankly sexist. Men are persecuted far more often than women. Is it time for a hat revolution? Should hat tyranny finally come to an end? This reporter says, "yes." I did not have much luck going through history books regarding hat history, seems that it just was not that important for historians to get to the root of this oppressive tradition. So, I had to do my own research on the internet and again I found lots of rules, but no good explanations as to why. An article on Southernliving.com took a stab at explaining hat etiquette arguing that discussing hat etiquette does not often happen, but that "there are moments when it becomes relevant, such as when you're about to walk into a wedding or when you're attending a religious service." But the same rules do not apply to men and women equally. For

example, the Southern Living article points out that for men "all hats should be removed upon entering indoors, which includes houses of worship (unless customary otherwise, like at Jewish synagogues), public buildings, and private homes, especially at mealtimes," but this rule is not universal. Men, the article claims, can wear hats at indoor sporting events, on public transportation or while "traversing public thoroughfare spaces such as airports, hotel lobbies, and elevators." But what happens if I run into royalty in an elevator, in a hotel lobby, or while riding the bus? Does this rule now change? Women on the other hand basically get to wear their hats anywhere as the article states, "It is always acceptable for women to wear a dress hat indoors!" How is this fair? Women, as long as their hat is a "dress hat," get a free pass into religious ceremonies, weddings, at private homes, unless they are wearing a hat that blocks someone's view. So, sorry ladies, no 10-gallon cowboy dress hats at the opera. There are exceptions to this as well, if a woman wears a hat for protection from the weather she is expected to remove it once she is indoors. So, the rules are, men cannot wear hats indoors at private residences, and women cannot wear hats indoors that help protect them from the weather, but in 1823 it was okay for mama to wear her kerchief and dad to wear his cap as long as they are settling down for a long winter's nap? I always took Clement Clarke Moore as a non-conformist rebel. Women aren't off the hook yet, while they can wear hats at "seated dining events" they are supposed to, as a sign of "common courtesy" take them off at "non-table seated events such as plays, shows and in movie theaters." Finally, some equality. Regardless of all these rules, there is no explanation other than "historic tradition" or what some people feel is "proper or polite" which can be entirely subjective. The tyranny of manners is what this hat etiquette should be called. Emilypost.com tries to find a historic root to the hat rule stating that, "if you were a medieval knight who failed to remove his helmet or lift his visor and identify himself the consequences could be fatal." An answer on Reddit echoed this sentiment as well stating that, "The removal of hats when indoors originates from knights removing their helmets to show that they're friendly and not challenging their king or other superiors." Well, that's all fine and dandy, but most hats are not made of metal, nor do they cover your whole face, so that makes no sense. Am I to insinuate from these answers that men in hats pose a threat to authority, but men without hats do not, and equally confusing, women, hat or not, just don't pose a threat in general? Is hat etiquette just a submissive masculine versus feminine thing? An article on uscatholic.org tries to explain "how the church got tangled up with this hat stuff in the first place." Pointing out that "The reasoning is not easy to understand," but seems to involve "tradition and custom as well as feminine humility and submission." The article cites a Biblical passage from 1 Corinthians 11:1-11, that states: "For if a woman does not have her head veiled, she may as well have her hair cut off. But it is shameful for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, then she should wear a veil. A man, on the other hand, should not cover his head, because he is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man." Hat rules, it would appear, are about power and submission, or were so in the beginning, but the question of, why wearing a hat can sometimes be disrespectful, remains a mystery. It clearly does seem to involve God, but why God cares about what I wear on my head and when, given all the other problems in the world, is an even bigger mystery. I can't imagine standing before St. Peter and him weighing my sins versus my good deeds and having the scales tipped because one time I wore a hat at the supper table. We can take some solace that much of the historical hat tyranny has been done away with, but not all of it, and until that day comes, I'm going to keep fighting the good fight. And with that, I tip my hat to you.