

THE SACRED AND THE SECULAR

Most of us have lived all our lives in a secular society in contrast to one that I am going to call “sacred” (or better perhaps, traditional). Modern America is a secular society, which means that it is not governed or determined by a sacred framework or a traditional set of values accepted by all its citizens.

It may be hard for us to imagine this since individually we may consider ourselves to be religious with a faith and holding at least some traditional values in which we walk or to which we belong. However, our modern American world is thoroughly secular, and you begin to understand the contrast when you enter a traditional society with its sacred structures.

Ethiopia, in contrast, is a thoroughly traditional and sacred society. Governed almost entirely by either Christian Ethiopian Orthodoxy or by a minority of Islamic values, it is one in which the whole nation participates collectively and unilaterally in a practice and piety which is shared by both communities and which is thoroughly sacred.

One cannot live a day without becoming aware that Ethiopia and Ethiopians are bound together by sacred principles articulated by their sacred traditions and faith. Daily life is determined by these principles—times for prayer, how to eat and how to drink, what relationships people have with each other, and what to wear.

All of these are determined by sacred traditions which are followed by perhaps more than 95% of the population. One example is fasting. This word rarely

enters our minds and vocabulary in modern America except perhaps as a dietary event. In Ethiopia, 50% of the year is spent in some form of religious fasting and this is followed by almost the entire population. If you are a Christian you fast. If you are a Muslim you fast. It is something that everyone does, and the menus in every restaurant or hotel always includes, as a major item, “fasting food.” We can hardly imagine it. (Fasting food is actually very delicious and easy to eat).



This is only one example, and it means that Ethiopians without question accept this major change in their diets from meat eating to a strict vegan diet due to religious (or sacred) considerations. Everyone follows this sudden dietary change due to religious observance.

There are other examples of the same principles having to do with prayer, church attendance, the use of holy water, and what is forbidden to eat and drink and what is allowed, as well as what forms of sexual activity are permitted or excluded. These are not even questioned by the ordinary citizen of Ethiopia.

We are not used to such strictures. Secular society prides itself in being “independent and rational” in its approach and giving each

person the right to choose his or her behavior (eating and living habits). We question almost everything and follow our own inclinations without asking permission. There are advantages and disadvantages to each way of living in each form of society. We in the West cannot imagine living by such restrictions because they either bother our freedoms or our sense of ourselves. In Ethiopia, however, they become the

personal meaning and identity of every person living there. Each individual sees him or herself as, first, Christian or Muslim, and then wears clothing, eats and otherwise acts accordingly every moment of every day.

This is not to say there may be a few “errant” individuals who have separated themselves in some way from these sacred activities (there are some in Addis Ababa for examples, but even there they are not many). The advantage is that you have a society that seems more coherent and less chaotic. You know more what to expect from the behavior and actions of each individual. You are not guessing what is required to be accepted and acceptable there.

One clear objective of a sacred society is to bind it together as a whole people who share the same values and common interests. The whole country of Ethiopia, in some respects, acts “tribal”—as though they belong together and to each other like a tribe or even like a family. Even today when there are political tensions, Ethiopians act tribally and as a whole.

This is hard for us to imagine in America where we have become so polarized over issues related both to the secular and the sacred. Politically we are divided, and the spectrum of sacred beliefs and ideas among

us is immense. We do not necessarily know how our neighbor's are going to react to anything. We are Americans but we cannot predict our neighbor's behavior based on religion or politics.

Every morning in almost every corner of Ethiopia chanting and calls to prayer (either Christian or Muslim) go out over loud speakers across the entire population. Some of these prayers and chants begin at midnight and continue on through the night and into the morning. In addition, over the loud speakers instructions are given from religious leaders and preachers admonishing certain behaviors or practices for that day or season.

We cannot even imagine such a society—but it exists, and for Ethiopians, at least, there is a certain comfort and safety in knowing that you, the individual Ethiopian, are fitting in and following divine law and its guidance or instruction (both Christian and Muslim). During my stay there, I conformed to Christian Ethiopian norms and found it interesting and in some ways very impressive. I became a vegan for more than half of my stay due to sacred principles. Interestingly the effects on my mind and in my body were recognizable. Also I

“fit in” like an Ethiopian (though as a foreigner they would have been gracious and would have allowed me my own “secular” ways). The fact was, on occasion I broke the fast by having milk in my coffee, or by eating or drinking earlier than before 2 pm (because I was becoming light headed without coffee or any drink). But I had to ask myself, was this due perhaps because I was rebelling against such authority as an American. Was I both sacred and secular, or was I neither?

