

Sunday, September 25, 2016
EXPRESSIONS by Father Ed

Customs

On a recent planet trip to Israel, I sat next to a Jewish American lawyer who lives in Jerusalem. While eating during the flight, we discussed a few issues, though he mostly complained about the service, despite the fact that he had been up-graded to Business Class. He was a real nuisance, continually harassing the flight attendant who patiently listened to his interminable harangues.

His first complaint concerned the pre-meal nuts which, he maintained, were not prepared in the proper kosher way. The rest of the food, doubly wrapped in plastic and even foil, appeared to be up to specific religious codes, though he still continued to grouse about domestic airline service. While I do not completely understand the purity requirements of orthodox Judaism, I could not help but notice a certain contradiction. Sitting around him were many Gentile (non-Jewish) passengers who were eating and drinking non-blessed, kosher prepared meals. Kosher is a ritual form of separatism which is impossible on a crowded airplane and often in other contexts too. The traditional and contemporary are rarely compatible. This may be less so perhaps in neighborhoods like Jerusalem or Los Angeles or Brooklyn but isolation, as the ancient Essenes and many other hermits practice, is the only guarantee of complete purity. While my fellow passenger was engrossed in ritual meal observances, he paid scant attention to the far more fundamental religious precepts of kindness and compassion. Rules often can distract from the higher priorities.

Israel is home to a variety of Jewish religious beliefs and customs. Some groups clearly identify themselves, wearing yarmulkes, shawls, arm wrists inscribed with the Shema Israel, tall hats, and other distinctive styles of grooming and dress. Israel allows them to be Jewish in a way they otherwise might not be able. Yet, I am always perplexed by ostentatious, self-identifying garb. Certain persons, of course, have to wear specific robes or uniforms, e.g., notably police, fire persons, and clergy, but only in official circumstances. To continually mark oneself as unique seems too separatist, not wanting to blend in, perhaps even judgmental. I have noticed the same among Catholic clergy too, with their traditionalist yearning for the days before Vatican II. In the lobby of the hotel in Jerusalem, for example, I noticed a priest, a Texan no less, dressed up in a cassock with red buttons, obviously looking for attention. Not even in Rome do clerics wear this kind of outfit, except for official or ceremonial events. Many people, he told me, mistakenly thought he was a bishop! Like all those wearing unique garb, he hoped to stand out, not just look ordinary. The risk, of course, is being considered odd or strange, even bizarre. Again, the real issue is the dichotomy this establishes between the traditional and contemporary, the secular and the religious which, in my opinion, is neither a realistic nor convincing strategy.

