

# The Origins of the Public and Private

by George Friedman - January 28, 2021

Last week, [I wrote a piece](#) about the virtues of private life and its centrality to the good life. I want to go deeper into the role of the private and public in Western civilization, and to show how complex and contentious the issue is. The place all such discussions must begin is the two cities that were the origins of Western civilization, Athens and Jerusalem. They were very different cities addressing similar issues in very different ways, but together, they were the foundation of Christianity, which until the recent Western enlightenment was the intellectual and spiritual heart of the West and therefore embodied the tensions between the two cities. Christianity is built on the Hebrew Bible, but also on ancient Greece. One of the strengths of Christianity derives not only from these origins but also from the way it constantly balances their differences. This can be seen clearly in the question of the home and private life.

The ancient Greek word for the household was “oikonomos.” Say it out loud and you’ll notice that it gave us the word “economy.” The home was the place not only for sleeping and eating but also for pursuing a broader sense of the private, from family to the contemplation of meaning. The other sphere of life was the political, which included participating in ruling the city and serving it – in peace and especially in war.

The Greeks saw the public sphere as morally and personally superior to private life. The Greek word for a private person was “idiotes,” meaning much the same as our “idiot.” This did not mean that private life was pursued only by idiots, but rather that by denying the superiority of public life, the private person failed to elevate himself toward the moral excellency of serving a city. The private was devoted to the economic, and the economic was devoted to private things, and therefore this life was seen as less than human. Humanity for the Greeks could be found only in the public space, in political life and dialogue.

It follows that the home itself was a necessary but distracting sphere. For Judaism, it was the heart of being human, because it was the center of the family. God had commanded that man be fruitful and multiply, and that process required a home, not only for the pleasures of reproduction but also for the profoundly religious act of giving birth and nurturing the child. This was the greatest mitzvah, a deed conducted in keeping with a commandment.

Jewish life revolved around the home, and the most important religious rituals were carried out in the

home, from the circumcision of a son to the Sabbath meal, Kabbalat Shabbat, the welcoming of the Sabbath. It followed that the economic life was seen as not incompatible with the good life but an essential part of it. The man had to leave the house to earn the bread and assure the safety of his family. The Talmud says that a man should love his wife as much as he loves himself and honor her more than he honors himself.

For the Greeks, the celebration of the gods was done in public, in the company of men. In Judaism, the greatest celebration takes place in the home, and the first blessing made on the Sabbath candles is the sole right of the woman. She presides over the sacred home and the sacred act of bearing and nurturing children. In ancient Greece, a woman's role was as marginalized as the home.

You will note that the discussion of the private quickly turns into a discussion of the home, and the discussion of the home turns into the relationship between men and women. The Greeks prized the politician and the warrior far above the woman, who remained at home. The Jews prized the family above the politician and the warrior. The Greeks celebrated honor; the Jews celebrated familial love. The Greeks searched for honor beyond the economic; the Jews conflated honor and the economic. Obviously, both must live in the public and the private, but for the Greeks, the time in the private was stolen from greatness. For the Jew, the public was stolen from the home life.

The Christian project was to reconcile the Greek and the Hebrew, philosophy and revelation, the public and private, the time outside of the family and the time with it. The monastic life of Catholics is in many ways a Greek life. The life that Max Weber speaks of in "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism" is in its way a Jewish life. But then Christianity is based on a Jewish mother and father's love for a son and, after his crucifixion, the absorption of the alternative, Greece.

In modern life, the complexity of men and women intensifies. The demand is that they be honored in public life, an adoption of the Jewish obligation to honor women and the economic, while the Greeks rejected both. The power of Jewish women is seen as less than it should be, based as it is on the family, reproduction and nurturing. In all of this, the enlightenment sought to cut its ties with its ancient roots but has managed to do so only with the inevitable confusion of something new and testing itself.

It is worth noting the degree to which America's founders, rather than overthrowing Athens and Jerusalem, sought to create a life in which the private is the main sphere of existence, but the public the indispensable. As an American and a Jew, I recognize the need to serve, but I still cherish and feel protected by the private, and the profoundly complex intellectual history that brought us here.

The relationship between the private and public defines the manner in which Greek cities and

modern nation-states behave. The location and physical structure may define much about a people. But there is a dimension that gave Athens Plato, and Jerusalem Ezekial. The way in which each stood against their political orders teaches us as much about geopolitics as rivers and mountains.

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