

The Sacredness of the Ordinary

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There is a sense in which this theme of the sacredness of the ordinary has been with me for much of my life. I will tell you a story that I myself find hard to believe. One evening when I was five years old, my mother asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I said that I wanted to be a priest. My mother responded, "Tommy, that's wonderful, but *why* do you want to be a priest." I shocked her by saying that I wanted to hold God in my hands. The Sacred in the ordinary. I was thinking, of course, of the consecrated host, which in my childhood could be held only by a priest. It would be many years before I came to understand that we *all* hold God in our hands, and that the Sacred dwells in the ordinary at every instant.

We usually make a strong distinction between the sacred and the ordinary. The notion of the sacred that I have in mind is captured well in one of Webster's definitions of the word: "sacred: holy; hallowed by association with the divine or the consecrated; hence entitled to reverence and respect." We humans create **sacred places**: churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples. Temple Mount in Jerusalem, for example, is sacred to both Jews and Muslims; and people of all religions have built shrines of various sorts throughout the world. We create **sacred times**: Ramadan, Passover, the Day of Atonement, Lent, Holy Week, Easter, and so forth. And we create **sacred rituals**: the Mass, Holy Week rituals such as the washing of feet, the veneration of the Cross on Good Friday; Pilgrimage to Mecca with all its rituals. Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, and Shinto all have their rituals. And indigenous people

throughout the world worship and celebrate in rituals, such as the very beautiful Shalako rituals among the A'shiwi people, commonly known as the Zuni Indians of New Mexico, and the various nine-day healing ceremonies conducted by Navajo *hatali* or "singers."

Yet the older I get, the more I am convinced that we humans make this distinction between the sacred and the ordinary only because we take our ordinary, daily lives for granted and we have to create these sacred places, times, and rituals to remind ourselves that our lives have to do with the sacred, to remind ourselves of how sacred ordinary life really is.

I learned the sacredness of the ordinary gradually through life experiences. Although I had always felt the presence of the divine in the beauty of nature and in the love of my mother and some family and friends, I learned the sacredness of life and the ordinary world most strongly when I went through chemotherapy for cancer and again when I cared for my ordination classmate, Fr. Jeff Sobosan, as he died. During my chemotherapy, simply watching the birds and squirrels in my garden, enjoying the beauty of flowers, and walking outside filled me with a deep sense of how beautiful and sacred life and the world are. The concern of my community and friends, even the gentle touch of my cats' paws, communicated to me the presence and love of God. And in the suffering and death of my ordination classmate, I sensed very deeply the presence of God and the sacredness even of the dying process and grieving. The theology I had been studying all of my adult life illuminated and validated these feelings.

This idea of the sacredness of the ordinary can be traced back to Jesus himself, I believe. I will give you only one example from his teaching, the parable of the yeast or leaven. This is a very brief parable that reads this way in the version in Luke's Gospel:

“To what should I compare the kingdom of God? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”¹ This parable would have shocked Jesus’ Jewish listeners for several reasons, including that Jesus compared the kingdom of God to the action of a woman, a challenge to a very patriarchal culture. But the shock I am interested in this evening is this: leavened bread was the *ordinary everyday bread*, not the sacred bread. Matza, the sacred bread, was (and is) unleavened. In fact, because of how women in Jesus’ time obtained the yeast to make leavened bread, it was the Jewish regulation that during the sacred times—specifically the observance of Passover—all yeast or leaven had to be removed from the house. How did women obtain yeast? You couldn’t run down to your local Safeway or Fred Meyer’s to buy a cube of Fleischmann’s yeast. They got yeast by taking a piece of leavened bread, putting it in a bowl, covering it with a damp cloth and placing it in a dark corner of the kitchen. The yeast would then grow on the bread and they could harvest it as they needed it. This process seemed, well, *unclean* . . . not fit for sacred times and observances. Yet Jesus compares the kingdom of God—the Sacred, a euphemism really for the very presence and action of God—to yeast in this ordinary, everyday bread.

The Christian tradition subsequent to Jesus teaches us of the sacredness of the ordinary in many different ways. There is, for example, the implication of the divine attribute of **omnipresence**: God is everywhere. Metaphysically this attribute is trying to say that one cannot confine the infinite God to any finite location. But surely to say that God is everywhere also implies that the ordinary world is God’s dwelling place. And by association at least, this ought to teach us that the ordinary world and our ordinary, daily lives are sacred because God dwells in them.

¹ Lk 13:20-21 NRSV

There is also the much-neglected doctrine of the Holy Spirit. The Christian tradition teaches us that the Holy Spirit, the third Person of the Triune God, is poured out on the world, so that the Spirit is working within every person, active within the ordinary world, unseen, felt only in extraordinary moments of religious awareness. The **work** of the Spirit is traditionally called “sanctification,” the making holy of all of us and the world itself. The sacred, the divine **in** the ordinary, confers sacredness **upon** the ordinary.

Moreover, many of the great theologians of the Christian tradition have understood the doctrine of creation to imply that the creatures of the world and the world itself exist by participating in the divine being or the divine life. This is a profoundly important idea: **to exist is to participate in the divine life**. If we reflect on this and grasp what this means, we cannot help but see the sacredness of what we take to be ordinary. I do not have the time this evening to enter into all the details of these various theologies of creation and existence, but I can give quick indications of how some great theologians tried to express this insight.

The Augustinian tradition is represented well by Anselm of Canterbury, the 11th century theologian, who formulated an analysis one can trace back to Augustine. Anselm argued that when we say someone is good or wise or holy, we are implying that *to one degree or another* that person **participates** in that good quality or virtue. But when we say that **God** is good or wise or holy, we are not describing how God **participates** in that quality or virtue. Instead, we are *actually* stating what the divine nature **is**. Since God does not owe God’s existence or being to anything other than God Godself, since whatever God is God must be through Godself and not through another, and since God is perfect, then God’s very nature **is** the infinite fullness of all perfections,

virtues or good qualities. God's nature *is* infinite goodness; God's nature *is* infinite wisdom; God's nature *is* infinite holiness; and so on. Without the prior existence of this infinite fullness of the perfection, there could be no *lesser* manifestation of it, because all limited or finite examples of that quality occur by participation to one degree or another in that quality. This analysis may seem rather abstruse to us today, but what it is implying is very beautiful. It is saying that all finite examples of any good quality, any virtue, exist by participating in the divine nature itself: God's infinite and perfect being *enables* all finite manifestations of virtue or goodness to be. **God's infinite beauty and goodness, in short, gives life to all beauty and goodness in the world.**

Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century also taught that finite creatures exist by participating in God's unrestricted act of being.² All creatures subsist, exist under or within or by participation in the being of God. He also argued in another context that secondary causes—that is, the causal agencies in the created universe—have true causal power and thus participate to a limited degree in the creative, causal power of God, the First and Uncaused Cause. In short, the creativity we observe in the ordinary processes of the universe participates to a limited degree in the infinite creativity that is the divine life.

Nicholas of Cusa, in the 15th century, focused on the infinity of God and developed a beautiful theology of God and the world. He says: “. . . God is the enfolding (*complicans*) of all things in that all things are in [God]; and [God] is the unfolding (*explicans*) of all things in that [God] is in all things.”³ God includes all things, **enfolds** all things in Godself; and God is present in all things—all things **unfold** from God. This

² *esse*; see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, Q. 44, a. 1.

³ Nicholas of Cusa, *De Docta Ignorantia*, II, 3

is not pantheism, because the universe of finite beings can in no way exhaust or be identical with the infinite being that is God. But it is a doctrine that will later come to be called ***panentheism***, the position that all things are in God and God is in all things. Once again, the ordinary is understood as existing by participating in the infinite being of God. And by implication, if all things unfold from God and God is present in them, and if God enfolds all things and all things are in God, then clearly ***all things are sacred both by their origin and their end in the divine***, in God.

The great Protestant theologian of the late 18th and 19th centuries, Friedrich Schleiermacher, also interpreted the doctrine of creation to imply this participation of the creature in the infinite being of God. In the following quotation he is speaking of religious feeling or affection, but what he says has profound implications for understanding God and the world:

. . . The contemplation of the pious is the immediate consciousness of the universal existence of all finite things, in and through the Infinite, and of all temporal things in and through the Eternal. Religion is to seek this and find it in all that lives and moves, in all growth and change, in all doing and suffering. . . . [I]t is a life in the infinite nature of the Whole, in the One and in the All, in God, having and possessing all things in God, and God in all [I]t is a revelation of the Infinite in the finite, God being seen in it and it in God.⁴

So according to Schleiermacher to have religious feeling is to be aware of the existence of all things in and through the Infinite, to ***feel*** and ***thus know*** the presence of all things in God and God in all. In short, religious feeling is to sense the sacredness of the ordinary despite any and all appearances to the contrary.

⁴ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, trans John Oman, from 3rd German ed., (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1958), pp. 35, 36.

Interestingly, the notion that the universe exists by participating in God's own life can also arise from comparing contemporary cosmological theories of the origin of the universe with the classical arguments for the existence of God. Contemporary scientific cosmology has two main ways of thinking about the origin of the universe. In the standard model, the universe begins in a "big bang" from a cosmic singularity. The singularity is an implication of Einstein's general theory of relativity and results mathematically when an equation requires division by zero. Einstein's equations show that when enough matter-energy is compressed in a small enough volume, everything goes infinite. Think of the entire mass-energy of the universe compressed into a point with a diameter smaller than that of a proton: this is virtually incomprehensible! The singularity is inexplicable by physics, since all the laws of physics break down at that point. Physicists believe that eventually they will be able to explain the history of the universe from 10^{-43} second after the "big bang," once they can integrate the gravitational force with the strong and weak nuclear forces and the electromagnetic force. But the singularity itself, which contains the entire energy of the universe, is not explainable—it must simply be assumed.

Needless to say, the fact that they cannot explain absolutely everything bothers some physicists, since they operate under the ideal of complete explanation. And so there have been several attempts to develop theories of the origin of the universe as a fluctuation in the quantum vacuum. The quantum vacuum is a well-established fact; it is an energy field—all around us, actually—that can give rise to 'virtual particles' which suddenly pop into existence from the vacuum and disappear back into it without violating the law of conservation of energy. None of the quantum fluctuation theories of the origin of the universe proposed to this point work, but it is possible that eventually

one might. Yet none of the theories even *attempts* to explain *why or how* there is a quantum vacuum; they simply presume it. Alexander Vilenkin, a cosmologist who developed one of these theories, has called his theory a naturalistic “creation out of nothing,” but this is disingenuous, because the quantum vacuum is not nothing; it is an energy field of unimaginable power. My point is that none of the current cosmological theories can explain the energy that *is* our universe. Give physicists and cosmologists the energy, either in the form of the singularity or the quantum vacuum, and they can explain everything. But they cannot explain the energy itself; they must simply assume it.

It is interesting to me that the classical arguments seeking to prove the existence of God arrive at a very similar position. As any philosopher will tell you, none of the classical arguments for God’s existence—the cosmological and teleological arguments—are actual proofs in the strict sense of the word; they each have flaws or leaps that render them failures as strict proofs. But in a sense they are saying much the same thing as current cosmological theories of the origin of the universe. I mean that these classical arguments say, in effect, give us God and the whole world becomes intelligible. Without God we cannot find answers to our questions of origin and cause; the only way to make sense of the universe is to assume the fact of God as its cause. No one can explain God; but give us God and we can explain everything.

Now surely these examples show that both in physics and in philosophy and theology the human intellect runs into its ultimate limits, where we must assume when we cannot explain or prove. But what interests me is the possibility that what we run into in *these* two cases might actually be related. Perhaps in some fundamental sense God and the energy constituting our universe are deeply related. Perhaps it is possible

that the energy constituting the universe is properly interpreted *theologically* as a participation or sharing in the divine life. Perhaps it is possible, in other words, to think of the energy constituting our universe, which has evolved in so many wonderful and beautiful ways, as the universe living by incarnating a share in the very life of God.

As some of you know, my own reflections on God have been deeply influenced by the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, the great English mathematician and philosopher who moved to the United States in his mid-sixties and ended his teaching career at Harvard University. In one of his books, *Religion in the Making*, Whitehead wrote a sentence that has haunted me since I first read it in 1972. He wrote: “The world lives by its incarnation of God in itself.”⁵ I don’t think you could have a more striking expression of the idea that the ordinary created world exists by participating in and including the sacred. And if something becomes sacred by its association with the divine, then surely we must understand and feel the sacredness of the ordinary.

Whitehead’s philosophy is not easy to summarize because he had a fondness for abstract thought and he developed an unusual technical vocabulary. But I will try to summarize for you in more simple language the heart of his philosophy of God’s relation to the world. For the sake of simplicity and clarity I will be speaking of how God relates to human persons. There are many technical questions involved in Whitehead’s analysis of reality that I cannot address tonight without losing myself in the complexity and abstractions that make him so difficult for most people to understand. I only hope that I can communicate to you some of the beauty of his vision of the God-world relationship.

Whitehead conceives of God and the world in a dynamic relationship in which they interact in each moment and give something of value to each other. His vision is

⁵ Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1967), p. 149.

very similar in some ways to that of Nicholas of Cusa and, I would argue, it is quite compatible with Christianity's triune understanding of God as Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier.

Whitehead affirms God's role as Creator and defines it as the eternal and unconditioned grasping and valuation of all possibilities. This role of God is foundational since God's grasping and valuation of all possibilities **organizes** them and relates them to each other, thus forming the basis of **order** for all possible worlds. Without order there can be no universe. God's **valuation** of all possibilities invests them with value relative to God's own aim. This implies that the general order of the universe is an **aesthetic** order, an order of potential beauty and goodness. God's "vision" of possibility is thus the ultimate actual ground of order and novelty, the ultimate source of the general potentiality of the universe and of all value. This aspect of God is absolutely necessary for there to be any course of events at all.

God acts as Creator by endowing us in each moment of our lives with all the possibilities open to us in that moment, and with freedom, our share in the divine life. God creates us not by determining what we must be or do or say, or what events must occur, but rather by providing all that we need to create ourselves in each moment and leaving us free to complete our own creation. God seeks to attract us toward the best possibility as God has valued it. But each of us, and every other agent in the universe, is free to actualize **any** of the possibilities open to that moment. God is present in every single agent in the universe, empowering it and seeking to attract it and the universe as a whole toward actualizing the best possibilities. But all agents in the universe enjoy freedom; they may be influenced by many other things besides God's aim or will and they may actualize even the possibilities God values least or abhors. The

world lives by its incarnation of God in itself, and it is free—it incarnates a finite share of God's own freedom, but there is no guarantee that freedom will always be used in the best or even a good way.

This view of creation goes a long way to helping us understand the *ambiguity* of our experience. If the world lives by the incarnation of God in itself, if the sacred dwells within the ordinary, how can it be that our experience of life is so ambiguous, so filled with suffering, evil, and pain, as well as beauty and joy? Whitehead's answer is that God creates not by determining outcomes but by *empowering* the agents of the universe, who in their freedom determine what occurs and are therefore co-creators of the universe. Hence the evils and sufferings in the world are due to how the agents of the universe exercise their freedom. Traditional theology has long recognized that God gives humans free will and does not determine their actions and decisions. Whitehead, recognizing that we are part of nature, argues that freedom to some degree characterizes *all* agents in the universe. The Anglican scientist and theologian, John Polkinghorne, has called this "free process," an extension of the "free will" defense of God's goodness in the face of evil.

But there is another aspect of God's relation to the universe, Whitehead holds. Once we decide to actualize one of the possibilities open to us, God must receive into God's own experience what we have made of ourselves in that moment. This is God saving the world as God takes it into Godself. God then transforms, unifies, harmonizes, and heals all the agents of the universe in the unity and harmony of God's own experience. God redeems the world as it passes into God's own experience.

In a major difference from traditional philosophical theology, Whitehead recognizes that in this aspect of God's relation to the universe God must be *affected* by

what the agents of the universe have made of themselves, what possibilities they have actualized. Among many implications of this view, one of the most important is that God *suffers* in two distinct ways. First, God suffers with all the suffering persons and creaturely agents in the universe. Whitehead states that God's reception of each occurs with perfect sympathy: God feels the sufferings of all suffering creatures directly and completely, with a perfection of sympathy infinitely greater than we are capable of. But secondly God also suffers in God's own right because of the difference between what has in fact occurred and what might have been: the beautiful possibilities of God's eternal vision, the "Kingdom of God" if you will, are not always actualized. We might have loved and cared for each other, but so very often we do not. The power of the cross of Jesus Christ is that it reveals to us how deeply God suffers with and for us, and *because* of us. Whitehead's philosophical theology honors and expresses this revelation.

There is much more that could be said about Whitehead's philosophical theology, but I will content myself with only one more point. In Whitehead's cosmological vision God and the world are related in a dynamic interaction of complementarity. God is the infinite and eternal ground of possibility, order, novelty, and value that is necessary for there to be any actual course of events at all. This aspect of God makes the universe possible, but, we should note, is an eternal vision of merely *possible* beauty and value. The temporal agents of the universe, finite and passing, incorporate this creative aspect of God in their own becoming.

In turn, these temporal agents give to God something God cannot otherwise acquire: *actualized* beauty and value. It is only through the agency of the creatures of the universe that the possibilities of God's eternal vision of beauty are gradually actualized. An analogy may help to show the importance of this. When we are hungry,

we can imagine all sorts of possible foods and relish the idea of them; but until we obtain some **actual** food, our hunger is never satisfied. Analogously, God “hungers” for the actualization of the possible beauty and values God envisions and presents to us, but only through the actualization of these possibilities can God’s “hunger” be satisfied. This is what we and all the agents of the universe give to God: **actualized** beauty and value; or the suffering of *failing* to actualize those possibilities. The growth of God’s Kingdom is always at God’s initiative, but its actualization depends on how we and all agents exercise our freedom. Traditional theology tells us that God loves the world, but that the world adds nothing to God. I could never understand this and I do not believe that it is true. The beloved **always** adds something to the one who loves. This is another way in which Whitehead’s philosophical theology shows the sacredness of the world: only through the actual world does God experience the **actuality** of God’s “Kingdom.” What happens in the world is of ultimate value not only to us, but also to God.

But the temporal world and all persons and agents within it lack permanence. They constantly “perish,” fading into the past. Some beauties and values endure over time, but eventually all things decay. The problem of death faced by human beings is merely our particular experience of a larger cosmic truth: above a certain level of complexity, all things perish and their accomplishments do not long endure. Moreover, the competing aims of persons, societies, and agents of the universe produce discord, suffering, evil, tragedy, and brokenness. Here, God provides what the passing world cannot otherwise achieve: permanence, harmony, unity, healing, and peace. God receives into God’s everlasting becoming every person and every agent of the universe and unifies, harmonizes, and heals them in the unity and harmony of God’s own

everlasting life. This is God saving the world as God takes it into God's own life. It is God's love for the world and God's compassionate healing of it. And in response to what has been done in the world, God seeks to lead the world beyond the tragedies and evils of the past toward new healing possibilities and new life. God's redemptive love flows back into the world: the Spirit of God sanctifies our torn and broken world.

Whitehead once said, "The concept of 'God' is the way in which we understand this incredible fact—that what cannot be, yet is."⁶ The Sacred is in the ordinary and the ordinary is in the Sacred—an incredible fact. Yet the Christian religious tradition, as I have briefly tried to indicate, has been teaching us this truth from the beginning. The little boy who wanted to hold God in his hands stands before you tonight at the beginning of his old age telling you that we **all** hold God in our hands at every moment. It is because we take our ordinary daily lives for granted that we so often fail to remember how sacred our ordinary daily lives are, how filled with the divine, how precious to God, how important to God in what we say and do to each other, to our fellow creatures, and to our world. We live and dwell in God and God lives and dwells in us. To **feel** this is to know in our hearts the true depths of our lives, the true depths of our cosmos, and the ultimate purpose and significance of our existence.

I thought to conclude my talk this evening with one of the prayers with which Pope Francis concluded his encyclical *Laudato Si*, because I think both of those prayers are very beautiful and communicate a profound spirituality in their simplicity. But instead, if you will indulge me, I will conclude with a short Navajo prayer that seems

⁶ Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, Corrected Edition, David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne, eds., (New York: The Free Press, 1978 [1929]), p. 350.

more fitting for a person approaching the last portion of his life. The word in this prayer translated as “beauty” is the Navajo word “*hozho*,” which is very important in Navajo theology and has the connotations not only of beauty, but also of goodness, well-being, blessedness, and peace; perhaps its strongest connotation is ***harmony***, harmony with the Sacred and harmony with the processes of the universe. The prayer goes this way:

With beauty may I walk.

**With beauty before me, may I walk.
With beauty behind me, may I walk.
With beauty above me, may I walk.
With beauty below me, may I walk.**

**In old age wandering on a trail of beauty,
lively, may I walk.**

**In old age wandering on a trail of beauty,
living again, may I walk.**

It is finished in beauty.

It is finished in beauty.⁷

⁷ Excerpt of a prayer for the Second Day of the Navajo Night Chant, I, lines 64-73. Translated by Washington Matthews