

“Not Like the Other”

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First Church in Boston

What do you call where I am standing—a chancel, a platform, a stage? And what about this piece of wood holding my notes—a pulpit, a lectern, a podium? Or this piece of wood beside me—an altar . . . or just a table? Of course, there’s also this whole room—is it a sanctuary, an auditorium, or maybe a hall? Why do we use specialized words rather than the same words we might use in other spaces? Why call this table an *altar*? This podium a *pulpit*? Why call this large hall of concrete, copper, and steel a *church*?

Religious traditions are often full of specialized language describing objects and places. If you grow up in a particular tradition, you may barely notice the oddity of such words as they are as commonplace to you as words like “cat,” “stove,” or “chair.” But if you are new to a particular religious tradition—or to any organized religion—they may feel odd. They may in fact just feel like nonsensical *jargon*. So why do we use such words?

I wrestle with this question more than you might think. On the one hand, I’m highly suspicious of religious jargon, which I fear is a barrier to those who are unfamiliar with it. Religious jargon can feel weird, off-putting even. Why not just call a stage a stage? On the other hand, *is* there something different happening when you take an ordinary object and put it to a specialized, religious use? Is there a real difference between “secular” and “sacred”? What does it mean when we name something as “sacred”?

Let’s explore another example by taking an imaginary field trip to the Museum of Fine Arts here in Boston. We’ve made our way through the grand entrance and around the rotunda into the Visitor’s Center. We then turn right to cross the café area, past the stunning [lime green tower](#) of glass icicles by Chihuly, and through the double glass doors into the American Wing. There, just ahead of us, are large glass cases displaying gleaming silver pieces of various sizes and shapes. Prominently displayed at the top of the far-right case is a large silver bowl. Peering at the tag for the object, you would read: “Paul Revere, Jr.; American, 1734-1818; Baptismal basin, 1761; Silver; Lent by the First Church of Boston.”

Here in this secular space rests a sacred object—our historic baptismal bowl. So, what is it? A sacred ceremonial object? An art piece of American history? Or perhaps a bit of sacred civil religion, forged as it was by a famous Patriot for a founding church of the nation?

What makes an object or a place “sacred”? A dictionary might tell you that sacred means connected to God, dedicated for religious use. But does this really answer the question? What is religion? What is God? What is sacred? It feels like we’re going in circles. Let’s try a different way into the question of sacred.

In her newest book, *Enchantment: Awakening Wonder in an Anxious Age*, writer Katherine May ponders a similar question. Reflecting on the heaviness upon her as she seeks to emerge from the years of lock-down and pandemic, May senses something missing. She writes,

I have lost some fundamental part of my knowing, some elemental human feeling. Without it, the world feels like tap water left overnight, flat and chemical, devoid of life. ... I need a better way to walk through this life. I want to be enchanted again. (8)

Her words evoke a push-pull response within me and perhaps within you as well. The language of “enchantment” unsettles the rational corners of me, the parts of me that distrusts language of magic and anti-scientific sentiment. And yet, there’s also that pull of recognition. Yes, I too feel that missing sense, that longing for a meaning that ripples throughout life. What do we call that feeling? That sense of something *more* beyond the mundane choreography of eat, sleep, work, wake the kids, put the kids to bed, pay the bills, schedule a physical, get an oil change, and on and on and on kind of life?

I understand May to be reaching for a way of living that notices and connects with the more. To help cultivate an “enchanted” way of living, she turns to the idea of *hierophany*, a term coined by religion scholar Mircea Eliade to “describe the way the divine reveals itself to us, transforming the objects through which it works.” (29) Continuing, she writes,

When we make a tree or a stone or a wafer of bread the subject of our worshipful attention, we transform it into a hierophany, an object of the sacred. ... Hierophany is the experience of perceiving all the layers of existence, not just seeing its surface appearance. (29-30)

In a sense, hierophany is a quality of attention, of noticing the more that exists beyond the surface, a more that “contains multitudes” to borrow Walt Whitman’s poetic phrase. Do you have such hierophanies in your life? Objects or places holding layers of meaning?

This question makes me think of the imaginary game of “if the house is on fire, what would I grab as I ran out the door.” As a young woman, I had a clear answer. I’d grab my journal, my ‘special’ pen, my favorite shawl. Older now, that shawl was regifted years ago and there have been many pens, many journals. None of it feels worth risking much to save. And yet, during the pandemic I bought a simple brass bell that has become a kind of hierophany. Ringing the bell to start and end my time of journaling, its sound beckons me into a space and time of looking beneath the surface, of connecting with a sense of deeper meaning, of communing with the divine ripples imbuing life with electric charge and color. More than just its sound, the bell links me to another world that sustains my spirit. *And* I’d not go out of my way to grab it in a fire. It’s just a bell.

I have also felt a beckoning call to deeper connection in *places*. Peering across a vast landscape from a mountain vista, I have felt awe and wonder at the vastness of things. Quieted by a sky brilliant with color from a setting sun on a horizon of water, I have felt *both* irrelevantly small *and* powerfully connected to all the drops in the ocean. And, entering a sanctuary like this one, I have found myself in tears bathed in a sense of hope and love whose vital presence was as real as you or me. Is this *enchantment*? What I do know is that life is more than the surface of things, more than the monetary value of objects, more than the material needs of physical survival. Paying attention reveals multitudes in the existence of things.

Perceiving layers of meaning—or the presence of God or Spirit everywhere—can help to “enchant” the world. But if “*Everything* is holy now,” as Peter Mayer sings, then what does “holy” even mean? Does holy lose any distinctive meaning when applied to *everything*?

According to the dictionary, to be holy or sacred is to be set apart, to be consecrated for a particular use, a religious use. It is saying that *this* silver bowl is *not like the others*. There is a distinctiveness found in its intentional connection to the deeper layers of meaning. To be sacred is to be a *hierophany*, an object transformed by its purposeful relationship with the divine.

When I stand before the baptismal bowl at the MFA, I think of the pages of church records in storage at the Massachusetts Historical Society. In 1761, the year of the baptismal bowl’s creation, there were 17 children baptized at First Church. I look at the list and wonder how many of those babies received water from this bowl? What hopes and fears did their parents feel? What challenges and affirmations did the minister offer as water dribbled from his fingers as they moved from bowl to baby? Such moments are sacred. We may have different rituals and words (and bowl) today, but the gift of a new life receiving a blessing imbued with hopes for a child’s good life remains.

Such rituals are crafted to turn our attention to the layers of meaning, to connections with the divine. In a world rife with competition for our attention, we can fail to notice such layers. Choosing to intentionally engage in rituals that beckon us to pay attention helps us to stay connected to the divine, to the more of life. The very ritual of entering into this sacred space can also help us to notice the mystery, the meaning, and the multitudes. This room may often be a concert hall or sometimes an auditorium for a school assembly, but on Sunday morning at 11am, this is the ritual space of sanctuary beckoning us into deeper layers of meaning.

Indeed choosing to congregate with other people can strengthen our engagement with the sacred layers of life. As May discusses at length, groups can be particularly good at challenging us to be better and holding us to account. In isolation, May fears our tendency to justify our worst behavior. She cautions:

I often see internet memes that tell us we are just as we are meant to be, God-made, and that leaves me deeply uneasy. I may not have a divine voice whispering in my ear to render it all clear, but I'm fairly certain that God—however you conceive of them—didn't plan for any of us to be racist. Every one of us has some kind of work to do. (99)

Congregating with a group of people with diverse thoughts and experiences challenges us to pay attention, noticing what we may not understand and where we may have work to do.

May takes this role of congregating a step further by linking people and God. For her, God is “the sum total of all of us, across time.” (100) In this sense, the divine presence that animates our living is the “whole broad spectrum of humanity.” Such a view of God beckons us to be in relationship with the vastness of human life across time, culture, and experience.

The description of the value of *pluralism* in the proposed Article 2 language for our UU bylaws makes a similar statement:

“We celebrate that we are all sacred beings, diverse in culture, experience, and theology.”

We may differ from each other in so many ways, but each of us are “sacred beings.” Sacred because we are all part of this intergenerational, interdependent web of Life, which some may choose to call God. Whether or not you use God-language or not, there remains the sense of something *more*, those layers of meaning and multitudes. These layers beckon us to notice them, to value them as something more than, set apart from the surface. To say we are all sacred beings is to perceive the ways each of us contain multitudes connecting us to meaning, to one another, even across our differences.

Perhaps rather than say *everything* is holy, I might instead say the holy can be *everywhere*. All around us, layers of meaning beckon us to notice them, to pay attention to the larger connections to other people, to other sacred beings. A silver bowl might just be a finely worked piece of silver and it might also be imbued with generations of loving parents seeking a good life for their child. To me, the “enchantment” that makes such a bowl sacred resides not in the magic power of a supernatural being, but rather in “the sum total of all of us, across time” striving to live meaningfully and well. My hope is that each of us will notice the sacred wonder in each of us and all of us are in our plurality, even as we all have work to do.

So may it be. Amen.

