Is Everything Holy Now?

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There is something very pregnant and precious about the end of summer on Cape Cod. Those of us who are here for a few weeks or for the season are steeling ourselves for the transition back to what we have come to reluctantly call real life, and those of us who will stay behind in paradise look forward to getting our beaches and roadways back, but will miss our summer friends. Standing on the deck of my house looking at distant Monomoy Island in the early morning sun, I feel like I am on a promontory looking forward and backward in time. The warmth of the rising sun reminds me of the season now ending, and the sharp chill in the air hints of the Fall to come. These doorway moments are holy times.

For every so often in this journey of life, something comes along that makes you just stop and take a deep breath, that coaxes or seduces or forces you to lift your head up out of the usual rut of your daily concerns and take a hard look at the big picture. Such was the song I sung earlier, when I heard its writer, Peter Mayer, sing it at the UU General Assembly in Minneapolis in June.

Everything is holy now, the song asserts. How can this be true? One might answer that it is not going to be true for everyone, just for certain people on certain spiritual journeys.

The song describes a spiritual journey that many of us in this room have taken, from an orthodox Christianity to what I would call a reverential naturalism. Throughout the song is a contrast between the childhood experience and the present:

When I was a boy, each week
On Sunday, we would go to church
And pay attention to the priest
He would read the holy word
And consecrate the holy bread
And everyone would kneel and bow
Today the only difference is
Everything is holy now

He could be describing the Episcopal Church I grew up in. In order to be confirmed by the bishop, I had to have classes in catechism, and thus learned the official doctrines of the church. One of these was the definition of a sacrament: an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. A sacrament is a ritual which is performed in the world we inhabit which points towards the supernatural world.

The Roman Catholic church recognizes seven sacraments of which two are considered essential: baptism, by which a person is admitted into the church or the body of Christ, and eucharist or holy communion, by which the worshiper is reminded of Jesus redeeming sacrifice on the cross by eating his body and drinking his blood. In Roman Catholic doctrine the consecrating of the bread and wine at mass turn them into the body and blood of Christ, a doctrine called transubstantiation which is not accepted in other parts of Christianity.

But in orthodox Christianity, whether Roman Catholic or Protestant the essence of sacrament is this idea that there is a realm of the holy which is conceived as supernatural, and then you have the realm we live in every day, the world of nature, and sacrament is the bridge between the two. Many of us in our faith development have rejected this scheme.

But there are two ways you can reject it. You can reject it by saying that everything is secular, that all talk of holiness is consigned to the realm of the tooth fairy and Santa Claus. As St. Paul says, when I became a man, I put away childish things. You can adopt a rigorous skepticism as to anything that your senses do not directly perceive or that isn't represented in peer-reviewed scientific journals.

But that is not the path Peter Mayer chooses. He rejects the dualism of orthodox Christianity by broadening the category of the holy to embrace the natural world. Everything is holy now. Holiness is not restricted to the sacraments or to church on Sunday. Holiness is in everything.

Along the same lines as Peter Mayer's song is this book by Chet Raymo titled "When God is Gone, Everything is Holy: the making of a Religious Naturalist." Religious naturalism is the proposition that we start with nature, with the world presented by our senses and by science; it is closely allied with humanism, and like humanism, it doesn't render God so much impossible as unnecessary. Where it would differ from humanism is that it wold not place humanity in the center of concern for we are but a peculiar species of naked ape inhabiting one small corner of a vast universe.

Raymo, a science writer who started out as a Roman Catholic and taught for many years at Stonehill College, a Roman Catholic institution up in Easton, MA, places himself in this religious naturalist camp, but is not ready to give up the idea of the holy. Rather, he wants to transfer the religious awe which Christians traditionally reserve for the divine to the mysteries of nature. In this, he is following the lead of Ursula Goodenough, who gave the Fleck lecture here in February of 2009 on Darwin's 200th birthday. Goodenough's book *The Sacred Depths of Nature* is considered the great manifesto of religious naturalism. If you haven't read it, I commend it to you.

Back to Peter Mayer. Mayer is not content with saying everything is holy, he also says that miracles are everywhere. A miracle is conventionally thought of as a magical happening, an occurrence which transcends the laws of nature, such as making the sun stand still, raising the dead, walking on water or turning water into wine. Properly seen, Mayer asserts, miracles are all around us:

Wine from water is not so small
But an even better magic trick
Is that anything is here at all
So the challenging thing becomes
Not to look for miracles
But finding where there isn't one.

Here our songwriter puts his finger on perhaps the biggest and deepest question in philosophy, which is lately being taken up by science: why is there something rather than nothing? Is there some cosmic need to exist that imbues all that does exist? We think we can trace our universe back to the Big Bang, which not only started all matter but time itself. But what caused the Big Bang?

This song describes an entire orientation towards the world and in the time we have this morning I won't be able to go into all its ramifications, so what I'd like to do here is try to set this shift in some kind of context with a little etymology, a little history, a little theology, and then to suggest some of the problems that this world view might open up.

Let's start with the word Holy. Our English language comes partly from Latin sources and partly from German. Holy is on the German side of the family and is related to the words whole and health and hale. Sacrament comes from the Latin side of our linguistic heritage; sacramentum is the past participle of sacrare, to consecrate, so sacramentum is that which has been consecrated, that which has been made holy. You have this related word also on the Latin side, sacrifice from sacer, "sacred rites: and "facere," to make or to do, so the root meaning of sacrifice is performing sacred rites.

Note that the root meaning does not involve giving something up, which is very much present in the common usage of the word sacrifice today. The present meaning derives as much from history and theology as from linguistics. In the Hebrew Bible, God establishes sacrifice in the sense of giving up a portion of food, giving it over to God, as early as the second generation of humans; the first murder comes about in fit of jealousy over sacrifice. Cain the farmer kills his brother Abel the herder out of jealousy when Abel's meat sacrifice is more pleasing to God than Cain's grain sacrifice. Later in the Torah, elaborate rules are enacted for performing animal sacrifices to Jahweh, and the Hebrew Bible also documents animal sacrifices performed by the Canaanite neighbors of the Jews.

Sacrifice was one means of connection to the holy in early Judaism, the other being the ark of the covenant, which contained the tablets fo the Ten Commandments given by God to Moses on Mt. Sinai. Originally, this was portable and lived in a tent, but in the reign of King Solomon, a temple was built in Jerusalem to house the ark, and that temple grew to be conceived as the place on earth where God resided, and the *axis mundi*, the connection between the earth and the firmament, the world above the sky, and sheol,

the world underneath the ground[1]. Within the temple interior was the holy of holies, and only certain priests were allowed into that room, and then only at certain rare times afer going through elaborate purification rituals.

Christianity arose out of the collapse of meaning within Judaism occasioned by the destruction of the temple by the Romans following the defeat of the Jewish uprising in 70 CE. The writers of the Gospels seized on an idea enunciated by St. Paul that the death of Jesus on the cross was God's sacrifice to God's self. Paul understood the love meal eaten by Jesus' followers as a remembrance of that last supper and thus the Jewish idea of sacrifice morphed into the Christian idea of sacrament. By eating that meal, the Christian is connected to Christ's sacrifice as the slaughter of the bull connected the Jewish worshiper to Jahweh.

The God of the three great monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, is often said to be transcendent. He or she is not of this world, created the world but stands apart from it. In many pagan religions, by contrast, God is said to be immanent, not transcendent. Immanent means indwelling and the idea is that God is present in the things of this world.

A good example of immanence is the reading from the Oglala Sioux sage Black Elk that we did this morning.

And I saw that the sacred hoop
of my people
was one of many hoops
that make one circle,
wide as daylight and starlight,

And in the center grew one mighty flowering tree

To shelter all the children
of one mother
and one father.

And I saw that it was holy.

This is a vision of the connectedness of all things. Remember that holy is connected to whole. Seeing everything that is as holy amounts to seeing everything in connection to everything else, what our Seventh Principle calls the interconnected web of all existence.

In a sense, the narrator of our song has moved from a childhood religion of transcendence to an adult spirituality of immanence, and I bring the song forward not be cause I think you need yet another piece of music for your repertory but because I think that this describes the spiritual journey of a lot of us.

It certainly describes mine. My childhood conception of God located him – it was always as him back then – in the sky. My first airplane flight, when I was about seven, was to St. Louis to visit my cousins, and afterwards I reported to my mom that I had seen Jesus standing on a cloud. The excitement of the flight for me was to get me closer to where I imagined God lived.

But part of the way I have developed, the way I have put aside childhood things, is through critical thinking, through doubt, and while I don't want to rain on anyone's parade, my critical mind raises a few problems with the approach outlined in this song.

First, I have a suspicion that if everything is holy, nothing is. Consider the ferocity with which Christians, Jews and Muslims contend over one acre of real estate in Jerusalem, the site of Solomon's Temple in Judaism, the site of Jesus' ascension in Christianity, and the site of the oldest existing Islamic building in the world. Holiness which is particular, which is restricted to one location or incarnate in one person is more intense than holiness in every rock and tree. People will fight to keep their Nantucket Sound

[1]See Levenson, Jon, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible*. Minneapolis: Winston Seabury, 1985. Paperback, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987.

from being desecrated by a wind farm or to keep a mosque from being built at the sacred ground zero, but who wold fight for holiness if every place was equally holy?

The word "worship" comes from giving or recognizing worth, and if we look at most markets we see that one of the factors which most influences worth is rarity. Beach front property, the hope Diamond, a 1969 S-Lincoln penny with double dye obverse, a 1912 Stutz Bearcat, a bottle of 1787 Chateau Lafite, these are all valuable because they are rare. If everything is holy, what particular things are worthy of worship.

But notice that this objection is based in market idea of worth; maybe really appreciating holiness requires us to give up the market mentality, to see the beauty in the common rock and seashell equally with the diamond or the chambered nautilus.

Secondly, my Universalist mind asks, if everything is holy, what about the bad places? The toxic dumps, the pools of radioactive water outside the nuclear power plant, the wastelands around the industrial parks, the places you wouldn't be caught dead walking your dog or riding you bicycle. Come to think of it, why restrict it to places? If everything is holy, then that includes the income tax return you haven't filed yet, the estranged ex-spouse or parent or brother you haven't talked to in ten years. It embraces Hitler and Stalin and all the villains of the public stage and the holocaust and the Haiti earthquake and global warming and species destruction, the depletion of oil and the public's indifference and the lies that are being told and believed. If everything is holy, Rush Limbaugh has to be included!

I mean, it's easy enough to say that the little red-winged bird singing outside my window is holy, unless you're the grub that bird has just eaten.

Third, I question whether mystery equals miracle. A mystery is anything that defies explanation, a miracle is something which defies the laws of nature. Religious naturalists start from nature which is regular and whose regularities can be described by impersonal scientific laws. When we get to a phenomenon which is not readily explained by those laws, we have a mystery, but we don't necessarily have a miracle.

For many religious naturalists, this mystery, coupled with an awe at the beauty and complexity of the things we do understand, is enough. It substitutes for the awe we used to feel, or were told we were supposed to feel, in the taking of the bread and wine. There are many things beyond our understanding, and one of the largest areas is our own minds; you can spend a lifetime just trying to get an understanding of yourself.

But here I have to say to myself, wait a minute, this is a song we're talking about, Peter Mayer did not write a creed or a catechism, and it's unfair to subject the words of the song to the same scrutiny you'd give a statement of faith. A song is supposed to inspire, to speak to the heart, and this one speaks to mine and perhaps to some of yours. If miracle doesn't equal mystery, it's a reasonable metaphor. Peter Mayer holds a valid poetic license, and I'm not here to revoke it.

For I think at base the attitude described in the song is a very important one, and a spiritually sophisticated understanding doesn't try to push it too far. To me, the best interpretation is that the statement everything is holy is not a statement about the world – what philosophers would call and ontological statement – but a statement about how we might wee the world, what philosophers would call an epistemological statement.

Let's talk about depression. Many of us battle depression on a daily basis, and for all of us there are plenty of depressing things around, bad things happening to us, some of them caused by us and some caused by external agencies. If you want confirmation that the world is evil, that human beings are inherently depraved, that you are a miserable failure, that nothing you can do will matter to anyone, that love is an illusion or it only happens to other people, that everyone else fits in but you, that the worst people are in control and are ruining everything, you can find support for all of these depressing thoughts in the daily news and in your own life. The First Noble Truth the Buddha taught is that everything is dukkha, which is sometimes translated as suffering, but which is better translated as unsatisfactoriness. Everything is unsatisfactory.

If we choose to be unsatisfied For the second Noble Truth is that the root of dukkha is craving and clinging. Dukkha is not a property of the world but of our minds. And there is another way of looking at

the world. It is the way of the Buddha and it is the way of the Universalist and it is the way of the Religious Naturalist: everything is holy.

It sounds easy, but it's not. It's not easy to say that the doctor's diagnosis of cancer is holy, that the poison ivy driving you crazy is holy, that the fight you're having with your husband, your overdrawn bank account, your flat tire on Route 6, the conking out of your boat motor seven miles offshore, the blue light flashing in your rear view mirror – that any of these things is holy. But if you can see them as holy, if you can see that the good and bad are two sides of the same coin, that without darkness there can be no light, without night there can be no day, you have attained spiritual progress.

Peter Mayer writes,

It used to be a world half-there
Heaven's second rate hand-me-down,
But I walk it with a reverent air,
Because everything is holy now

In Orthodox Christianity, this life is but a dress rehearsal for the hereafter, when all will be reunited in wholeness. As death claims more and more of the people I have loved, this idea has a lot of appeal, and I love to sing spirituals which talk about the other shore, where we'll no more take the parting hand and be reunited with those who have gone on before in that great home in the sky. But I recognize that image of wholeness as an illusion. The same trick of mind that imagines I will be happy if only I can buy that car or live in that house leads me to believe I would be happy if I could be at a grand reunion with my grandmother and my dad and my mother and the aunts and uncles and friends I've lost along the way. Those people were never all in the same room at the same time, and when several of them gathered as they did at my grandmother's for Sunday dinner in the 1950's and 60's, they didn't get along all that well with each other and the teenage Edmund wanted desperately to be somewhere else.

What Peter Mayer's song says to us, my friends is that holiness is not in the sky, in the great beyond or in the past; it can be found in the here and now if we open our hearts and walk this earth with a reverent air. Our memories are precious, but so is the present time we are living through. It is a holy now, and if we open our eyes, it is everywhere. Amen

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Readings

Holy Now by Peter Mayer

When I was a boy, each week
On Sunday, we would go to church
And pay attention to the priest
He would read the holy word
And consecrate the holy bread
And everyone would kneel and bow
Today the only difference is
Everything is holy now
Everything, everything
Everything is holy now

When I was in Sunday school
We would learn about the time
Moses split the sea in two
Jesus made the water wine
And I remember feeling sad

That miracles don't happen still
But now I can't keep track
'Cause everything's a miracle
Everything, Everything
Everything's a miracle

Wine from water is not so small
But an even better magic trick
Is that anything is here at all
So the challenging thing becomes
Not to look for miracles
But finding where there isn't one

When holy water was rare at best
It barely wet my fingertips
But now I have to hold my breath
Like I'm swimming in a sea of it
It used to be a world half there
Heaven's second rate hand-me-down
But I walk it with a reverent air
'Cause everything is holy now
Everything, everything
Everything is holy now

Read a questioning child's face
And say it's not a testament
That'd be very hard to say
See another new morning come
And say it's not a sacrament
I tell you that it can't be done

This morning, outside I stood
And saw a little red-winged bird
Shining like a burning bush
Singing like a scripture verse
It made me want to bow my head
I remember when church let out
How things have changed since then
Everything is holy now
It used to be a world half-there
Heaven's second rate hand-me-down
But I walk it with a reverent air
'Cause everything is holy now

Chet Raymo, When God is Gone, Everything is Holy, pp. 104, 106

The scientific theists (Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris, for example) and the scientific theists (Francis Collins and Owen Gingerich, for example) hammer away at each other. We haven't had such a rousing clash of God-clingers and God-debunkers since the days of Thomas Huxley and Bishop Wilberforce. Meanwhile, those of us in the "nature loves to hide" tradition go quietly on our way, wondering what all the

fuss is about. We fully accept the scientific view of the world, and regard as superfluous any appeal to the supernatural. Yet we are not adverse to being allied religious. Our response to the natural world is one of reverence and humility in the face of mystery that transcends empirical knowing – now, certainly, and perhaps forever. "Agnostic" does not do justice to the celebratory aspect of our position. Nor does "pantheist" adequately express our view of what nature hides. "Creation-based spirituality" has a respectable pedigree, although "creation" hints at an anthropomorphic Creator. "Religious naturalism" gets close to the mark.

Whatever we choose to call it , we are part of a tradition that has found expression within al the major religions of the world. Within the heritage I know best – Roman Catholic Christianity –the tradition has been espoused by voices as various as the fifth century Celt Pelagius and the twentieth-century scientist/mystic Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. ... If one were looking for a patron saint of religious naturalism within the Christian tradition one could do no better than to read the sermons of the thirteenth -century Dominican friar Meister Eckhart. ...

Two things in particular distinguish the Eckhartian tradition from the Augustinian: a unitary rather than dualistic understanding of the world, and an unwillingness to speak of God as a person, or, for that matter, to speak of him (her? it?) at all. Fall/redemption, body/soul, matter/spirit/, natural/supernatural: these distinctions, in the Eckhartian view, are artificial impediments to a fully joyous engagement with the creation. And, it must be said, these same oppositions are at the root of the current tension between science and religion. The first step in Eckhartian spirituality is to say 'yes' to creation, withholding nothing..."