Sunday, September 30, 1973
THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SACRED

Recently I saw an ad for a new magazine whose first edition will be published this October. The headline of the ad was — "Nothing's Sacred!" and the subhead was "How's that for an editorial policy?" The text of the ad went on to explain that the new magazine would not worry about who or what it might offend. No individual, no institution, no idea would be sacred or off limits. In a similar way, we've often heard people say, "Nothing's sacred anymore!"

The ad and the saying point up a problem in our time. Both pose the question of what is the meaning of sacred and what is the importance of the sacred. Now certainly there is an everyday meaning of the word "sacred" and a religious mean-ing of the word. And this morning we want to talk about the sacred from the religious point of view and in particular from the point of view of the Christian faith. But there is a relationship between the everyday meaning of the sacred and the religious meaning.

In everyday life for something to be sacred means that it is worthy of reverence or respect — that there's something special about it. Sometimes we've used the term "sacred cow" which means a person or idea or object sarcastically regarded as immune from reasonable criticism. That comes from the religion of India, where cows are sacred and are allowed to roam freely and not be hurt.

The sacred has always had an important place in all religions. To put it another way, since the beginning of time, all religions have dealt in some way or another with the idea and the dimension of the sacred. In the religious sense, the sacred has always had a special relationship to God. From the beginning of time, human beings have set aside certain places and times as being sacred or special or holy.

In the Old Testament when Jacob in his dream at Haran saw a ladder reaching to heaven, with angels ascending and descending on it, and heard the Lord speaking from above it, he awoke and was afraid and cried out: "Surely the Lord is in this place, how awesome it is. This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." And he took the stone that had been his pillow and set it up as a monument to mark the place and he called the place Bethel, which means the House of God. In other words, he marked the place as being sacred, because he had met God there.

And so, it has been throughout the history of humankind. Many of us have our own sacred places and they are sacred because of something that happened there. We make cemeteries sacred because our loved ones are buried there.

However, in our own time, particularly in the last 20 years, we've seen a decline in the idea and importance of the sacred among many people in our own country.

For example, in 1965, the best-selling religious book was one by Harvey Cox, entitled, "THE SECULAR CITY." In that book, Cox described the secularization process as "the breaking of all supernatural myths and sacred symbols." Truly, nothing was to be sacred anymore. He went on to say that the age of the secular city is an age of no religion at all. It no longer looks to religious rules and rituals for its morality and its meanings. He said that it will do no good to cling to our religious and metaphysical versions of Christianity in the hope that one day

re1igion will once again be back. He predicted that such things are disappearing forever and that means we can now let go and immerse ourselves in the new world of the secular city.

It was in this period of time that the many “Death of God” theologies appeared.

But if some theologians and others thought religion and the sacred which goes with it was dead, they were dead wrong. While some were celebrating the virtues of the “Secular City” and “religionless” Christianity and the demise of the sacred — all around us, people were again turning to religion and looking for the sacred and the holy, and if not in the church, then outside the church. It was in that per-iod of time that an increasing number of people, particularly the young were turning to such things as the study of astrology, psychic phenomena and other occult pursuits, demonology, witchcraft and even the worship of Satan. Then a few years later we saw the rise of the “Jesus” cults and other kinds of religion as well.

People were discovering that we cannot do away with the sacred. People who think of themselves as non-religious continue to be haunted by the very realities they have refused and denied. In 1969, Harvey Cox himself had a new book out, entitled, “THE FEAST OF FOOLS, in which he under scored the need for religious festival and celebration. Just now Mr. Gox has a new book out entitled, “The Seduction of the Spirit,” in which he begins to recognize again the importance of the sacred.

In fact, throughout our culture, indeed throughout the world, it is evident that the majority of the “irreligious” still behave religiously, even though they may not be aware of the fact. Think of the many superstitions which still abound in our supposedly scientific culture. The most irreligious still knocks on wood three times, or wears a good luck charm, or reads the horoscope column.

While the so-called nonreligious or irreligious person attempts to destroy old myths, he replaces them with new myths. A whole volume could well be written on the myths of modern persons, many of them totally inadequate.

There are mythologies camouflaged in the plays we enjoy, in the books we read. Or the cinema, that “dream factory” takes over and employs countless mythical motifs. Whether we kill time with a detective story or enter into such a foreign temporal universe as is represented by any novel, or movie or play, it takes us out of our personal duration and incorporates us into other rhythms, making us live in another history and we begin to transcend ourselves.

So strictly speaking the great majority of the irreligious are not liberated from religious behavior. They sometimes stagger under a whole magico-religious paraphernalia which has often degenerated to the point of caricature and hence is hard to recognize for what it is.

Religious behavior is even to be seen in movements that openly avow themselves to be secular or antireligious. Examples are nudism or the movements for complete sexual freedom, ideologies in which we can discern traces of the “Nostalgia for Eden,” the desire to reestablish the state of paradise before the fall when sin did not exist and there was no conflict between the pleasures of the flesh and con- science.

In short, the majority of people without religion or any idea of the sacred, still hold to pseudo religions or degenerated mythologies. There is nothing surprising in this for we human beings are by nature religious and come out of a religious history.

Instead of we human beings becoming secularized and less in need of religion and the dimension of the sacred, we are discovering that as our ruling values become ordinary and desacralized, we human beings need all the more a valid dimension of the sacred, the holy, the transcendent!

It was in an attempt to rediscover the meaning of the sacred, and the forms it takes, that my wife and I recently spent two weeks in Israel and Jerusalem, which is known not as the secular city, but as the Holy City. The purpose of the conference we took part in was to look again at the meaning of the sacred, the holy in our time, and how we experience it in our religion and through the arts, and in life around us. What makes the sacred, sacred?

We went to Israel and Jerusalem, because our Christian Faith which has its roots in the Jewish faith, had much of its beginning there. The state of Israel and Jerusalem its capitol, contains the history of sacredness in its many sacred places.

But before we talk about some of those sacred places, we need to ask the question — "For the Christian and the Jew, where does sacredness begin? What is its origin?“

1. All sacredness begins with God. The creation story which we read as our scripture lesson and indeed much of the rest of the Bible as well, testifies to the fact that the “earth is the Lord’s!” God made it, and it is the ref ore good! It is sacred!

Some have said in past times that the earth is the devil’s and have depreciated material things. The Greeks held for a time the idea that flesh is prison, matter a misfortune. This view still persists in many forms. It is still alive in the church for some preachers insist on regarding a person not as a person but as a vague soul in a fettering body. And do some not tend to think of farming, especially dirt farming as a lower enterprise than some other profession? Perhaps not in Nebraska!

To all this kind of thinking the Bible replies quietly, “No, the earth is the Lord’s.” There is something sacred about the earth, about all material, about life itself. God made it all and though we may disfigure it and misuse it, it is essentially good. This kind of Biblical view essentially validates science and art, for these without this kind of view would be dabbling in the unclean.

The earth and all the universe is sacred because of its divine origin. And the sacred reveals itself to us in many forms. Who can escape moments of awe as he contemplates the cosmos? All of us have experienced the sacred in our appreciating the world of nature. The religious dance later in the service is an attempt to point to the sacred in the world of nature.

We have a saying that a person should not be treated as a thing and the saying is true. But perhaps we should add that a thing should not be treated as a thing. It too has an element of sacredness about it. God created it and it is good. All material is to be treated with reverence and respect. If we persist in treating things as only things, and as if we owned them, we ourselves sink into thinghood. In our increasingly technological, machine-like, computer world, a sense of the sacred is even more important.

The earth is the Lord’s and the fulness thereof, meaning everything in the cosmos, the world and those who dwell therein, meaning you and me and the whole pilgrimage of persons, and all other orders of life. For he has founded it upon the seas and established it upon the rivers; it all rests in the Abyss of His Eternal Nature and is all held in his eternal Grace.

2. But even though all creation is sacred, we human beings have great difficulty in experiencing the sacred in a generalized way. Just as truth always comes to us in the particular, in specific situations, so also the sacred comes to us in particular times and places and events. Thus, from the beginning of time, as was the case with Jacob, we mark places and mark times as being sacred.

In every religion, the experience of the holy or the sacred is mediated by some piece of finite reality, by some symbol, or place or day or ritual.

We do this even in our everyday lives. We mark the day we were born as our birthday. It is a special day. But it also points to the fact that each day of our life is special and sacred, not just our birthday.

The sacred is always revealed in the particular, in events and places. That's what the Bible is all about.

In fact, in our own language, we often use the phrase, "It took place." By it we mean that for something to have happened, it has to have a time and a place.

Thus, the land of Israel and the city of Jerusalem are filled with places where events took place which we consider sacred. Such places are not any more sacred in themselves than any other place, but we confer sacredness upon them because of what they represent, because of what happened there.

It was in this spirit that we visited such places as Bethlehem, the site of Jesus' birth, the shepherd's field, his home in Nazareth, and in Jerusalem such places as the Garden of Gethsemane, the Mount of Olives, the place where Jesus was crucified and buried, and other sacred places. WE waded in the River Jordan where Jesus was baptized and visited his ancient headquarters in Capernaum. Visiting such sacred places helps to recall some of the main events in our faith and reminds us of the sacred not just in these places but in all of life as well.

The site of the ancient Jewish Temple, known as Solomon's Temple, and later the Second Temple, both of which were destroyed, is an especially sacred place both to the Jews and the Moslems. It is known now both as the Temple Mount and the Dome of the Rock. Tradition holds that it was also on this spot that God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac and then provided a ram to sacrifice in place of Isaac.

Again, all of these sacred places point to the fact that we human beings cannot experience the sacred "in general." We have to experience the sacred in particular events and places and times. Such events and places then illumine all else that is sacred.

In the creat1on story in the book of Genesis, God creates the world and then rests on the 7th day and hallows that day. By so doing, however God hallows all days. That one day is not any better or more sacred than the other six, but ±t is important that we make one day sacred in order to illustrate that all time is sacred.

This is the meaning of Jesus Christ. God's love is not just love in general, but it takes on flesh and blood in time and place. It becomes personal!

All of this underscores the importance of the sacred in our own lives in particular times and places. What are the sacred times in your life? Where are the sacred places?

I invite you to make this church a part of what is most sacred in your life. I invite you to begin with Jesus Christ, the sacred in the flesh and to learn from him about what the dimension of the sacred is. Amen.