
Book Reviews

Kimberly K. Smith, *African American Environmental Thought: Foundations* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 257pp., \$29.95, ISBN 978-0-7006-1516-2.

In *African American Environmental Thought: Foundations*, Kimberly Smith argues that black American writing regarding the environment is rich, complex, and deserving of a place in 'the canon of American environmentalism' (p. 3). The foundations of black environmental thought, she maintains, rest mainly on theories of the proper relationship of black individuals to land marked by the history of oppression and theories of cultural vitality in light of biological determinism and scientific racism (pp. 7-8). As Smith admits, her book is limited in scope to elite male discourse and does not deeply explore other related subjects such as folk practices and religion. Despite these limitations, *African American Environmental Thought* is a necessary, well-written, and carefully argued work, providing a solid foundation for future study of this important but long overlooked subject.

African American Environmental Thought unfolds chronologically, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century and concluding with the early twentieth-century work of Alain Locke and W.E.B. Du Bois. The first three chapters focus mainly on ideas concerning the interrelations between social freedom, land ownership, and responsible resource use in the Civil War and Reconstruction Era South. Slavery, Smith argues, generated a powerful ambivalence toward nature among black Americans. Most slaves were forced into tightly controlled contact with the natural environment but were at the same time barred from owning land. By removing creativity from the process of farming and connecting it with punishment, the slave system created a profound sense of emotional alienation among slaves from a formerly uplifting, community-building process. Black American environmental history, Smith continues, 'is a history of struggle against these forces of alienation and dispossession' (p. 12).

Chapters 2 and 3 explore various responses to these conditions of alienation and dispossession, primarily those inspired by the democratic agrarian tradition. Democratic agrarians, like Thomas Jefferson, tied individual and community morality to owning and working the land. Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington, among others, drew upon this tradition and argued that personal freedom and the establishment of vital communities required uncoerced management of the land. Working the land under conditions of true social freedom helped redeem lands tainted by oppression and to fulfill the biblical calling to 'finish Creation' (p. 66). This call to finish Creation required 'not a blind mastery but a creative response' to the world (p. 97), and remained a central religious element to African American environmental ethics.

Following the Civil War, social and economic conditions in the South led many black Americans to the more industrialized northern cities. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 focus

on the ways that W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke dealt with issues of an increasingly urban and environmentally alienated black population in a social context characterized by biologically deterministic theories of culture. Deterministic theories, grouped together by Smith as examples of 'scientific racism', included the Social Darwinism of Herbert Spencer and other claims of Northern European biological superiority that frequently appeared in popular and scholarly media (pp. 105-13). Whereas democratic agrarianism tied personal freedom to individual work, biologically deterministic theories of culture seemingly removed cultural agency from individual actors (p. 113). Responding to such theories, Du Bois and Locke adapted the work of Franz Boas, who argued that nature played a limited role in shaping culture, and of the American Pragmatists, who emphasized the importance of experience in epistemology, into new theories of black American society (pp. 120-22).

In Smith's analysis, theorists like Du Bois and Locke developed unique theories regarding the relationship between cultures and environments. Together with the democratic agrarian tradition, Smith concludes, these theories formed the foundations for contemporary African American environmental thought, contributing to the environmental justice movement (p. 188). Black social thought was necessarily tied to environmental thought, Smith maintains, since 'most of what they [black theorists] say about racial oppression makes sense only against a background of claims about humans' proper relationship to the natural world' (pp. ix-x). In effect, African American social theories broaden scholarly views of what counts as environmental thought.

African American Environmental Thought provides an essential base for further research into subjects such as the role of religion in the relationships between black Americans and nature. Smith notes the need for more work on the role of religions in black environmental thought, on non-elite black Americans, and on the applicability of black environmental theories to broader environmental issues (pp. 192-93). *African American Environmental Thought* is the starting place for such inquiry.

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Michael York, *Pagan Theology: Paganism as a World Religion* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 242 pp., \$21.00, ISBN 0814797083.

This is a remarkable book, deeply learned and ethnographically rich, and written with brio and insight into the deep strains of Pagan beliefs and practices within the spiritual cultures of all peoples. The book's title is somewhat of a misnomer. 'Paganism', as York puts it, 'is experiential and not a religion of creeds and faith affirmations' (p. 12), so the book does not offer an analysis of Pagan beliefs within a traditional theological framework. But it does provide a highly readable phenomenology of Pagan practices and ideas along with Pagan survivals within non-Pagan religious traditions. On this count, the book is compelling and successful.

For York, Paganism is the 'root religion' from which 'historically all other religions are offshoots' and 'an organic alternative to the institutionalized authority and parochial insularity that much religious expression has become' (pp. viii-ix). Unlike Hegel

(and his modern inheritors such as Masao Abe and René Girard), who regards Paganism as a precursor of book-based religions destined to be superseded by these religions, York understands Paganism as the progenerative perennial religion that both encompasses and challenges the ossified doctrines and structures that have long entombed other religions. York's writing has an edgy, us-them tempo, a sort of we-Pagans-against-the-world attitude.

York's typology of Paganism in its ancient and modern forms is a productive heuristic throughout the book. He defines classical (often pre-Christian) Paganism as belief in a plurality of male and female gods, efficacy of magic and ritual, the body and nature as mediums of sacred power, and a shared universe in which gods and humans are mutually interdependent. This ancient belief system—often identified as folk religion or vernacular spirituality—can be found in traditional Chinese animism, Japanese Shinto, South American shamanism, American Indian spirituality, Afro-American spiritism, and the various indigenous religions of Australia, the Pacific Islands, the Americas, India, and the Middle East. To this group of ancient Paganisms, York adds a discerning awareness of the complexity of modern Western neo-Paganisms. These modern incarnations include, for example, Voodoo, which has its origins both in primal spirituality and in African-derived practices rooted in the New World; Geopaganism, which includes unconscious Pagan gestures such as saying 'good morning' to everyday passersby; and Recopaganism, which is the conscious practice of ancient belief systems through, for example, the revival of Celtic religion in the teachings of Gerald Gardner, the twentieth-century British founder of contemporary Wicca.

However, it is not York's analysis of pre-Christian Paganism or neo-Pagan Wicca that I found most interesting but, rather, his wonderfully nuanced accounts of his journeys through Indian Hinduism. His thick description of Hinduism on-the-ground is the heart of the book for me. India is the environment in which his typology of ancient and modern Paganisms comes alive. The reader travels with York through throngs of packed-together devotees and colorfully arrayed priests into the sanctum sanctorum of a Shiva temple resplendent with incense, fruit, sweets, and oil lamps. Throughout his travels, the play of divinities, avatars, and heroes provides a sensuous religious experience. Hinduism artfully weaves together the high religion of Brahmanistic dogmas and texts with the popular religion of pre-Aryan festivals and rituals in a tableau of satisfying other-worldly and this-worldly religion. York's thesis that Paganism is the always-present vernacular spirituality that provides the world's religions with full-bodied experiences of the everyday sacred is artfully set forth in his travelogue of lived South Asian religion.

In my judgment, the success of the book is also its blind spot. York's argument for first-order Paganism as the original and (often superior) counterpoint religion to the other religions misses the deep-rootedness of these religions in Pagan sensibilities. This is ironic because while York makes clear that Paganism survives in the Western monotheisms, in practice he is at pains to underscore the differences, not the similarities, between primal religion and the religions of the book, especially Christianity. 'Whereas the Christian God is transcendent, the pagan godhead is immanent... Whereas [in paganism] the gods and spirits interact with humanity... In the Western transcendental context, in fact, the godhead is, in principle, beyond the sway of human effect and petition' (pp. 13, 37). It is true that classical Christianity has evolved into a religion that focuses on a distant God in a heavenly realm far-removed from the passions and concerns of life in this world. But this is only half of the story.

The other story Christians tell is that God, in Jesus, is fleshly, mortal, and human—that the God Christians worship is both wholly other and wholly same, both transcendent to and immanent with life on earth. It is not enough, then, to say that Christianity's cyclical calendar is a Pagan survival. The crucial point, rather, is that it is systematically infused with Pagan beliefs and practices. Christianity worships a dying–rising divinity who is thoroughly human; its practitioners symbolically eat their God's flesh and drink his blood; its Godhead includes a sacred animal, the Holy Spirit, who consistently appears as a dove within its basic story; through prayer the robustly intimate relationship between God and human beings changes and evolves; and the earth, in its best expressions, is a sacred grove to be cared for and protected. Franz Rosenzweig said that the genius of Christianity is its unique amalgamation of both Jewish and Pagan themes, rendering it a new religion with global aspirations. York misses Christianity's distinctive identity as a Pagan hybrid in his otherwise extraordinary achievement.

Today Paganism is flourishing, though we may not see this at first glance. But we still call hard alcohol 'spirits', refer to movie stars as 'idols', and understand historic places and military battlefields as 'sacred sites'. Our common vocabulary belies our assumption that Paganism was vanquished by the militant monotheisms of the West. York's gifted analysis sets the stage for further appropriations of this aboriginal and organic tradition whose wisdom is desperately needed in a world chronically addicted to unsustainable modes of existence.

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Sigurd Bergmann, *Creation Set Free: The Spirit as Liberator of Nature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 406pp., \$38.00, ISBN 080282224X.

Creation Set Free is the English translation of *Geist der Natur befreit*, published in German in 1995. The author has undertaken a creative and ambitious task. His volume brings together Orthodox creation theology of the fourth century and Western creation theology of the late twentieth century. More specifically, he juxtaposes the writings of Gregory of Nazianzus (330–389) with the insights of John B. Cobb, Jr., Gunter Altner, Gerhard Liedke, Ulrich Duchrow, Christian Link, Jurgen Moltmann, Sally McFague, and Rosemary Radford Ruether (European and American scholars who published from the 1970s onwards). Bergmann selects Gregory because of his role in late antiquity, the remainder because of their position in late modernity.

The choice of Gregory of Nazianzus is fruitful, and the chapter which sets his life and work in context leads into a substantial discussion of his insights into creation. 'Creation set free' is the theme, and four central concepts prepare the way for the correlation which follows. First, the concept of *sociality* is used to relate the social dynamics of the Trinitarian God to the social dynamics of the community of the created: the unity within the Godhead, Gregory explains, models the unity within creation. Second, Gregory identifies *movement* as a divine attribute: the boundary

between the uncreated and the created, for example, is always open to God's movement. Third, there are aspects of *suffering* to explore and explain: Gregory shows that the suffering of Christ, human suffering, and the suffering of the cosmos are interconnected; suffering is the pain of being set free. Fourth, Gregory goes to the Scriptures to emphasize the importance of the *Spirit*: the community of creation is vivified and permeated by the Spirit; the Spirit indwells creation and the Spirit consummates creation.

Bergmann's exposition of Gregory is the best developed and most substantial portion of the book. It also provides a methodology to correlate the writings of Gregory, in late antiquity, with the ecotheologians in late modernity. It is a very careful and very tightly organized framework. A succession of writers, each important and each recognized with respect, are brought into the chapter. Their writings are assessed within Bergmann's framework of analysis. There is, however, more analysis than sociality. The methodology limits the scope for mutual encounter. The spark, created by contact with the Gregory writings, is not ignited by the correlation chapter.

Bergmann has been stimulated by other encounters. Two find a place in the final chapters. In Chapter 5 he examines the paradigms of liberation theology from the perspective of ecotheology. The pool of dialogue partners, he suggests, can be enlarged to embrace the whole of creation. By ascribing precedence to poor and victimized persons, the way is open for us to listen to the voices of creation. This conceptualization resonates with Indigenous peoples who treat features such as rivers, and oceans, as well as wildlife, with deep respect. The community of saints and the hermeneutics of the cross can be enlarged to embrace the whole of creation. The Spirit is the liberator of nature.

Bergmann, in the years since *Geist der Natur befreit* was written, has turned his attention to contextual theology (Bergmann 2003). In Chapter 6 on methodologies, he identifies the value of contextual theology and directs attention to local theologies, to social memory, and to events and cultures which shape theology. Bergmann values contextual theology, and he applies it in his teaching, but he has not used it to full advantage in *Creation Set Free*.

In *Creation Set Free*, Bergmann has gifted the reader with an encounter with Gregory of Nazianzus, and enlarged awareness of the interplay between the community which is God and the community which is creation. He has also introduced a constellation of ecotheologians. I found myself enriched yet frustrated. The encounter with Gregory is limited by a contextualization which is partial. There are seven short sections which describe the politics, the economics, the ecology, the theology, the social conditions, the technology, and the worldview of late antiquity. But at no point is Gregory positioned within that world. Nor is the interplay between local context, local events, and emerging theological insights explored. Liberation theology and contextual theology open up a whole suite of questions. Was Gregory the son of a peasant farmer or a rich merchant? Was Nazianzus a thriving community of artisans living in mutual solidarity in a rural area, or was it an inland town in decline and suffering environmental degradation because of exploitation by seaport cities? Were there power structures, local resistance movements, and changing ecologies? Questions such as these are under-answered. The interplay between context and theology is not explored.

Similar questions about sociality and context arise in relation to the twentieth-century scholars. Where is each positioned? What are the social, economic, political, and ecological forces at work in their home places? What are the individual events or the

collective events that have shaped their ecotheology? Are they a collection of individuals or a community of scholars?

Bergmann's work is outstanding but there is potential still to be achieved. *Geist der Natur befreit* has stood up to careful peer scrutiny and deserves serious attention by an English language audience. Gregory of Nazianzus makes profound ecological and theological sense. An awareness of the community of compassion within the Trinity, and within the nexus of God and creation, is greatly enhanced by the publication of *Creation Set Free*. That said, Bergmann has the skills and the insights needed to do more: to take his contextual theology insights into his studies of Gregory; to communicate in language that will bring his colleagues in science and technology into the discussion; and to engage *in situ* with liberation theologians. The insights are there, the efforts at communication are to be encouraged.

References

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Peter Hanns Reill, *Vitalizing Nature in the Enlightenment* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2005), 388 pp., \$41.80, ISBN-10: 0520241355.

A common conviction among critics of modernity, such as in Horkheimer and Adorno, is to locate the 'self-destructive tendency of Reason' in the dialectic of the Enlightenment, which created the roots, tools, and ideologies for scientific instrumentalism and its totalitarian mastery of nature and humanity. After Peter Hanns Reill's comprehensive and convincing study of the language of nature among mid-Enlightenment thinkers, one can no longer reproduce this explanation without differentiations. The Enlightenment period, along with its view of and practice with nature, represents not one but a number of 'opposed Enlightenments'. Reill, a California-based historian and distinguished expert in German Enlightenment history, sets out in this book on a further expedition into this complex period—a significant undertaking, not only for German and Western history but also for world history to the present day—with the task of investigating what he denominates as 'Enlightenment vitalism'.

While historians critical of Enlightenment views have so far primarily focussed on the progress of mechanistic science in the first phase of the Enlightenment and interpreted aberrant approaches and discourses as either isolated or proto-romantic, Reill offers us an impressively substantial and overwhelmingly detailed reading of a broad range of more and less well-known thinkers and texts which emerged after the breakthrough of Buffon's *Histoire naturelle* (1749–78).

Following Alexander von Humboldt—one of the enlightened vitalist's central representatives—and his method of 'decomposition', Reill works through a large number of sources in different fields of science and philosophy, drawing an astonishingly clear and differentiated picture that makes his analytical term 'vitalism' an appropriate classification of the majority of Enlightenment scientists between 1749 and the success of the later *Naturphilosophie*. While *Vitalizing Nature* is demanding reading, Reill's study offers a generous and wide-ranging use of quotations, extensive small-scale descriptions of the sources, and well-written interpretations (especially satisfying for this German-born reviewer) that invite the reader on an exciting expedition in tracing the driving forces of individual and interrelated scholarly reflections about nature.

The result of Reill's exploration is a detailed study of the main characteristics of Enlightenment vitalism, which he regards as a coherent movement distinguished by a set of common assumptions that were based on a unique epistemological position grounded in the imperative to mediate between extremes and opposites. The vitalists created a basic language of nature, humanity, and society, which was characterized by the ideal of harmony and the overriding goal of mediation. The movement was driven by a radical questioning of mechanistic natural philosophy, which had reduced nature to a mechanism and humans to machines.

They furthermore dethroned the dominating role of mathematics as a model of reality and focused on the interconnections of different disciplines, mainly natural history, chemistry, life sciences, and medicine. Unlike the neomechanists of their time, they redefined matter with a new concept that apprehended natural variety and dynamic change, and which was based on the foundational assumption of the interplay of active life forces. Due to the inability to fully explain these, vitalists called these forces 'occult powers' (not to be misinterpreted as 'esoteric') and sought, through mediations and an emphasis on the centrality of interconnection, to reconcile or overcome such dichotomies as mind/matter, cause/effect, sex/gender, and life/death.

There is no doubt that Reill presents a highly accomplished exploration of what he calls a new synthetic type in the history of the Enlightenment, and that he succeeds in substantially contributing to writings on the history of science as well as the history of culture and nature. Objections to Reill's work are possible perhaps but, in my view, would only serve to deepen his insightful exploration. How, for example, should we evaluate the function and significance of religious and theological elements in developing the vitalist language of nature? A complementary interpretation of the spiritual driving forces, sources, and implications would be exciting to undertake for a historian in Reill's wake. Also, Reill highlights clearly the vitalists' need to build their criticism of mechanism on the creative correlation of earlier thinkers such as Aristotle and Paracelsus. But what about other influences, such as Greek theological and philosophical sources like the middle Platonists in late antiquity? The concept of 'divine logoi in creation' (from the Stoics through Origen to medieval scholastics) seems to me to cohere with the concept of active life forces. Finally, a question could be asked about one of vitalism's central figures: Alexander von Humboldt (central in Reill's and this reviewer's 'pantheon'). Did Alexander really succeed in integrating and interconnecting the aesthetical, empirical, and analytical dimensions of his research activities with such profundity, as Reill claims? I have my doubts, even though I wish it had been so, and regard Humboldt's strongly intended but not fully achieved synthesis as a central and still more than valid challenge. These questions point to the rich potential for further widening Reill's analysis of vitalism.

What makes Reill's study fascinating for those who operate in academic contexts still dominated by a one-dimensional Enlightenment mentality is its clear visualization of another mainstream in our Western history of enlightened science. *Vitalizing Nature in the Enlightenment* offers a strong imperative to revitalize and recompose those elements in our history which can contribute to a true life-enhancing science. It seems also to demand a reconstruction of the Enlightenment's purported central vision, in favour of a science *with* and not *about* nature. The last lines of Reill's excellent book concisely express this demand: 'Yet their basic epistemological temper still serves as a challenge, relevant today as it was then, asking us to seek liberation in the ease of uncertainty, recognizing scepticism but holding it at bay, and while acknowledging humans' capacity for debasement, hoping that understanding nature and human nature will help us realize the best in ourselves' (p. 256). And, as a theologian, I would continue: ...realizing the best in ourselves implies at the same time realizing the best in creation in synergy with its Creator.

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Michael F. Strmiska (ed.), *Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2005), 382 pp., \$85.00, ISBN 1-85109-608-6.

In *Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives*, Michael F. Strmiska gathers together introductory essays on a number of Pagan traditions which previously have been underrepresented in scholarly accounts of modern Paganism, namely reconstructionist or ethnic traditions. Strmiska's introductory chapter provides an excellent account of the differences between the more commonly known Wicca and these other traditions, explaining the importance of ethnicity and the specificity of localized traditions. Chapters focus on Italian American Stregheria (in comparison to Witchcraft in Italy) by Sabina Magliocco, Irish Druidry by Jenny Butler, Icelandic and American Asatru by Strmiska and Baldur A. Sigurvinsson, British Heathenry by Jenny Blain, Ukrainian Ridnovera by Adrian Ivakhiv, and Lithuanian Romuva by Strmiska and Vilius Rudra Dundzila. These authors provide histories of the ethnic/indigenous traditions of Europe and make comparisons between the reconstructions of these traditions in their native lands and in North American contexts. A key question for many of these authors, and the practitioners they are studying, concerns the significance of specific land and place for the practice of an ethnic and/or indigenous religious tradition.

With such a clear focus on reconstructionist Paganism, readers of this anthology may be surprised to find the final chapter by Stephanie Urquhart focused on Paganism (mostly Wicca) in the U.S. military. While this essay, along with the others, is well-constructed, it does seem slightly out of place in the context of the other essays on ethnic traditions. However, and perhaps this is the reason Strmiska included the piece, it does also highlight a group of Pagans previously missing from academic discourse.

Modern Paganism in World Cultures would make an excellent text for a course in modern Paganism and/or New Religious Movements as a way to move away from a Wicca-centered perception of Paganism. The inclusion of maps to highlight the specificity of location is useful as are the many pictures included in each chapter. Most importantly, though, Strmiska points out that when addressing these reconstructionist traditions, the notion of Paganism as a nature religion takes on different connotations. Thus the very construction of Paganism as a nature religion is complicated in a way that allows students to gain a more nuanced understanding of Paganism. In a European context, ethnicity is highlighted much more than a generic nature, which is the focus of much North American Paganism. However, it is an ethnicity which is land-based; thus nature and ethnicity are intertwined. This does lead to questions of the implications of racist discourse in these ethnic-focused traditions. However, Strmiska, and the other authors in this collection, question the (largely North American) assumption that ethnic pride equals racism.

Though some reconstructionist groups utilize Pagan ideology and imagery as a way to further racist agendas, the vast majority are simply trying to connect to ancestors in specific places and spaces, without suggesting that one ethnicity is superior to another. *Modern Paganism in World Cultures* does not fully address all of the questions inherent in a twentieth- and twenty-first-century appeal to ethnicity, but it does provide a well-grounded introduction to the subject and encourages further dialogue.

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