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Book Review

Evan Berry, *Devoted to Nature: The Religious Roots of American Environmentalism* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 272 pp., $29.38 (pbk), ISBN: 978-0520285-73-6.

Evan Berry's book *Devoted to Nature* offers a fascinating new take on the religious origins of the American environmentalist movement. Unlike many works that focus on individual thinkers like Aldo Leopold or Rachel Carson, Berry focusses on popular organizations and writings that capture the motivations of the American mainstream. His central claim is that the American environmentalist movement grew out of Progressive Era (1890s–1920s) Christian soteriology (i.e. rooted in the scheme of fall and redemption). In other words, the environmentalist movement was in some way the result of ordinary Americans trying to overcome the effects of sin in their lives. Christians of this period, like Christians of earlier periods, believed that human beings lived in a fallen condition. Peculiar to this era was the locating of sin and its consequences in urban pursuits such as drinking, going to movies, gambling, or whoring. Urban environments where the human impact was greatest were seen as both corrupted by sin and facilitators of sin. In this urban world it was increasingly difficult to reflect on the divine. However, not far away were pure, virgin wilderness areas unspoiled by sin, where one could go to be in the presence of God's world as yet uncorrupted by the presence of 'fallen man'. Spending time in these environments was key to moral improvement because it was seen as time spent with the Savior. Hence Christian groups of the period organized regular outings into these areas and sought to preserve them for them for soteriological reasons.

Berry's argument is carefully nuanced: 'Concepts from Christian theology were the necessary but insufficient conditions for the emergence of a…cultural formation in which nature provided the…basis for spiritual redemption (p. 14). Although Christian soteriology was a key factor, it was certainly not the only factor, and Berry also argues that tensions between the movement and traditional Christian doctrine should not be downplayed. Nevertheless, the weight given to soteriological motives is surprising in that it counters several alternative explanations. One is that environmentalism arose in resistance to Christianity. This view gained traction with Lynn White's 1967 article arguing that the roots of the ecological crisis lay in the Christian belief that nature was devoid of spirit and so made only for human use. By this logic the environmental movement arose as a rejection of Christianity in which spirit or the God principle was removed from heaven and infused into nature such that love of nature replaced love of God.

Another alternative countered by Berry is that the environmentalist movement was a secularization of Christianity. Following this argument, one may expect that on the way to this secularization Christians might move away from central Christian doctrines like soteriology toward a vaguely deistic or unitarian sense of stewardship of nature. From there they would move on to advocate merely technological forms of forest management. By contrast Berry's claim that the motives of Progressive Era American environmentalists were heavily soteriological means that they were neither secular nor anti-Christian, but rather located near the heart of popular Christian piety.

Four core chapters explore how nature worked as a spatial and experiential basis for this Progressive Era experience of Christian salvation. Chapter 1 explores the historical development of walking in nature as a morally virtuous activity. Chapter 2 describes how Evangelicals of the period countered the moral dangers of urban life by organizing clubs like the Boy Scouts, the Sierra Club, and the YMCA to plan summer outings where their members could experience the moral corrective of nature. Christian camp meetings became a ritual convention that 'established an interior space where guests could reflect on the divine presence in Nature [and] apprehend God's immanence' (p. 70). In the idiom of the time this form of moral correction by nature was called 'muscular Christianity' (presumably as opposed to the wimpy or effeminate Christianity of those who did not get out into nature). Chapter 3 traces the history of Christian thinking about mountains. Early medieval thinkers had pictured the original creation as geometrically smooth with mountains being wart-like distortions caused by sin or punishment for sin. By the nineteenth century, however, American Christians saw mountains as analogous to cathedrals (but perhaps even more effective in facilitating worship). Chapter 4 examines the popular genre in which members published their memoirs of time spent in the woods in club journals such as the *Sierra Club Bulletin* or *The Mountaineer*. According to Berry this genre blended romanticism with natural history and Christian reflections in an unconsciously eclectic harmony that expressed the piety of the period.

Throughout the work Berry's tone is free of either Christian advocacy or anti-Christian reaction. It is free too of condescension. The optimism of the Progressive Era was of course ended by the horrors of the World Wars (especially World War II) and the Great Depression. Postwar Christians looking back on that era often felt a certain condescending disdain for what they saw as the naive romanticism of the time. Because Berry's gaze is free of this disdain he is able to give a remarkably fresh portrait of American Christianity in this period. At the same time he is not blind to its failings. In fact, part of Berry's purpose in writing the book is to make readers aware of the present dangers that may stem from overlooking these origins. He argues that to ignore the Christian soteriological roots of the modern environmental movement leads to an inability to understand both its strengths and its weaknesses. On the one hand the underlying religious assumptions provide a motivating power that merely technological approaches to solving ecological problems will never have. This religious core is still present as a cultural resource for ecological action that can be tapped into today. To overlook it is to miss an important opportunity for organizing the American public around ecological issues.

However, the unrecognized Christian origin of the movement also has its downsides. Victorian Christians imagined the bars and brothels of the urban environment as a defiling result of the fall. Any human impact on nature was by extension similarly defiling. By contrast, the wilderness where God's handiwork could be seen most

clearly was imagined to be virgin or pure nature unspoiled by human contact. According to this view, anthropogenic changes to forests were almost by definition 'spoiled'. This view led Christians to see nature as empty of previous human inhabitants such as Native Americans, and it also led them to overlook or undervalue the anthropogenic quality of the forests that had been actively managed by Native Americans. It led to a defining of ecological goals as the restoration of nature to an imaginary and impossibly pure previous state. Berry argues that in moving forward the environmentalist movement should tap into the religious motivation that is there in the American public, but that it must also rid itself of the illusion of a nature unspoiled by human touch.

Devoted to Nature is a delightful read that opens a very different window on an important period of American history. It provides valuable new insights on how turn-of-the-century popular Christianity contributed to the particular shape the American environmentalist movement has in the present. In doing so it offers key insights on how best to move forward.

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