
Book Review

Brett Malcolm Grainger, *Church in the Wild: Evangelicals in Antebellum America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 280 pp., \$45 (hbk).

As Brett Grainger observes toward the start of this book, America's 'nineteenth-century evangelists are rarely mistaken for nature mystics' (p. 3)—arguably an understatement, especially as reflected in scholarly assessments of the period. The antebellum piety of evangelicals is still commonly associated, after all, with the overheated worship practices of an underclass culture, and with almost exclusively biblical, rather than earth-grounded, springs of divine revelation. And yet, as Grainger points out, evangelicals did find sacred inspiration in the land's *watery* springs as well—along with its arboreal groves, fields, rivers, and mountains. Like St. Augustine, they were disposed, in fact, to honor the natural world as 'God's first book' (p. 64)—first, at least, in the temporal, natural course of humanity's access to saving revelation, if not in primacy.

So the original, significant contribution of Grainger's study is to map in graphic detail the evolution and varieties of religious experience that immersion in the nonhuman world spawned for all sorts and conditions of evangelical believers from this period. The book succeeds admirably in fulfilling that charge. Its success is partly attributable to Grainger's fluent writing, but largely to the expansive range of its research. *Church in the Wild* draws not only on diary entries, sermons, conversion narratives, and histories, but also on poems, letters, illustrations, and hymn texts, including some lesser-known shape-note compositions penned by colorful figures such as Vermont farmer Jeremiah Ingalls.

The result is a fresh perspective on the manifold versions of nature reverence in America that flourished in nineteenth-century America beyond the more celebrated 'Concord philosophy' of Transcendentalist New Englanders like Emerson and Thoreau, or the more rationalistic, apologetic formulations of natural theology sponsored by figures like William Paley. For evangelicals, the distinctive feature of this earth-grounded godliness was the way it 'sought not to supplant devotion to a personal God but rather to pursue Christ as the secret life of every thing' (p. 7). Grainger points out how, for such believers, the evangelical imperative to welcome personal experience of God's work upon the heart could be stirred in the first place in response to outdoor scenes. And once souls had been born again, they could also find their vision of the natural world transformed, in turn, through the grace of their achieved conversion. Yet throughout these processes, evangelical believers, instead of replacing Christian fellowship, 'sought spiritual experience in nature as a supplement and spur to corporate worship' (p. 7).

As one might expect, the gradually evolving preference in many evangelical quarters for conducting collective worship in the great outdoors became crucial in the formation of a distinctively American church—or churches—in the wild. Revivals, outdoor baptisms, Methodist or other brands of camp meetings, and the arboreally secluded hush harbors favored by African American slaves all figured in this development, as Grainger explores at length in his opening chapter. Fields, forests, and waterways thus offered evangelicals not only a prime locus of religious experience, but something of what I might call a sacramental medium for its realization—or what Grainger calls ‘a tolerable idolatry’ through which palpably to know and to feel the action of God’s grace.

In his second and third chapters, Grainger proceeds to explain how practices of natural contemplation, drawn from an eclectic array of popular and churchly precedents, also served to nurture solitary modes of devotion during this period. Some proposed that reflection on that first book of the nonhuman world might serve, in fact, to open rather than to supplant the book of scripture. So only after the Civil War was ‘the book of nature’ swiftly demoted from its standing as ‘God’s first book’ to that of a decidedly ‘second-class revelation’ (p. 64). The fourth chapter, ‘Healing Springs’, goes on to explain how certain vitalist practices that evangelicals associated with the nurture of godly health and healing intersected with, and were eventually overshadowed by, secular appropriations of hydrotherapy and mineral springs. And the book’s final, most provocative chapter on ‘The Theology of Electricity’ suggests how emerging vitalist practices of electrotherapy, mesmerism, and ether somehow managed to blend, albeit temporarily, disparate veins of science and pseudoscience with evangelical piety.

The evidence this book provides leaves no room for doubt that Christologically centered evangelicals found significant inspiration for their faith through encounter with the natural world. While bringing to light this previously underrated dimension of nature reverence, *Church in the Wild* also points out that its proponents ‘could claim a much broader base of support than the elite readers of *Walden* and other transcendentalist works’ (p. 3). True enough. But if nature-involvement served indeed to nurture evangelical devotion for many believers during the period in question, the converse influence of evangelicals upon the nature of American landscapes—that is, upon the genesis of environmental reform movements in America—is not so evident from this account. So one might conclude that those presumably ‘elite’ New England Transcendentalists did after all exercise a broader, more enduring influence than antebellum evangelicals when it came to birthing modern environmental movements—especially if one takes account of all the cultural descendants of Emerson and Thoreau in figures such as Walt Whitman (New York’s rowdy, populist version of the Transcendentalist), John Muir, Ed Abby, Aldo Leopold, and others.

To be sure, John Muir’s neo-Transcendentalist outlook blended along the way with his reconceived evangelical heritage. And historian Mark Stoll, in his *Inherit the Holy Mountain: Religion and the Rise of American Environmentalism*, recalls the several ways in which remnants of evangelical religiosity in lapsed Presbyterians and others helped to inspire environmental reform initiatives throughout the Progressive era and beyond. It is fair to wonder, though, whether such reform-minded implications of conversion for antebellum American evangelicals differed from the witness of their believing British counterparts. Thus, for the evangelical William Wilberforce,

experiencing the momentous inner change of personal conversion inspired a subsequent activist passion to change the world—not only by advancing the cause of antislavery, but also, as extended to nonhumans, by encouraging more humane treatment of animals through the formation of organizations such as the SPCA. Several factors could explain why American evangelicals were less prominently committed to such activist campaigns, so Grainger's treatment is not necessarily deficient in this regard.

In any case, what emerges most clearly from *Church in the Wild* is the force of its challenge to various still-persistent images of evangelicals—as narrow minded souls, disposed toward bibliolatry, uneducated, unimaginative, and unwilling to embrace the beauty of this physical world as God's own Creation. Grainger provides numerous counter-cases to these stereotypical notions. One favorite of mine is his evangelically savvy reading of the African American spiritual titled 'Steal Away', according to which 'stealing away' becomes 'a coded signal to slaves that a service would be held that evening at the hush harbor', a green arboreal 'space where Jesus was present already, waiting to take possession of believers' hearts during worship' (p. 25). And when it comes to our marveling over God's grace in the astral firmament, who among us now remembers that those oh-so-familiar childhood verses, 'Twinkle, twinkle little star', first arose as an evangelically inspired meditation on the heavens, composed by sisters Jane and Ann Taylor? By virtue of disclosures like these, *Church in the Wild* qualifies not only as an informative read, but also as pleasurable and often arresting.

John Gatta
Department of English
Sewanee: The University of the South
jogatta@sewanee.edu

References

- Stoll, Mark. 2015. *Inherit the Holy Mountain: Religion and the Rise of American Environmentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press).