
Book Review

Jon Mathieu, *Mount Sacred. A Brief Global History of Holy Mountains Since 1500* (Winwick, UK: The White Horse Press, 2023), 170 pp., £30.00 (pbk), ISBN: 978-1-9121867-71-6.

As the sub-title indicates, *Mount Sacred: A Brief Global History of Holy Mountains Since 1500* is a historical study of sacred mountains dealing mostly with the period following 1500 CE. Focusing on a few selected mountains from Asia, Europe, North America, Africa, and Australia—some of which he visited, others of which he researched using scholarly sources—the author, Jon Mathieu, is primarily interested in how the sacredness of these mountains has reflected and influenced political and social ideas, institutions, and movements over time up to the present day. Although he deals with conceptions of the sacred in the first part of the book, drawing on Catholic theology and contrasting that with veneration of mountains and nature in Asian traditions, he has little interest in contributions from the academic field of religious studies. The ‘Mount Sacred’ in the title refers to no specific mountain of that name. As Mathieu explains, ‘It [Mount Sacred] is invented and stands as a cipher for numerous mountains around the globe to which sacredness has been attributed in the past or is attributed in the present’.

Mount Sacred is organized in three parts. The first part, titled ‘A Start in Two Stages’, lays the groundwork for the rest of the book in two chapters. Chapter One discusses the canonization of the sacred in Catholicism, mountain rituals in Tibetan Buddhism with the Pure Crystal Mountain in Tsari as an example, Mount Sinai and the Monastery of Saint Catherine, and the symbolism of mountains in the French Revolution. Chapter Two examines Chinese mountain systematics in general, sacred science as a precursor to natural science in Europe, and the rise of mountain research and the sport of alpinism. The concluding section of this chapter presents Mathieu’s views on the emergence of the academic field of religious studies out of theology with a focus on approaches to the sacredness of mountains and nature that have led to what has been termed the greening of religion.

The second part, ‘Mountain Itineraries’, is the longest, with eight chapters, each focused on one or more mountains or a mountain-related topic such as Christian crosses on European mountains. Chapter Three, on Mount Kailash, focuses primarily on the mountain’s sacredness in Tibetan Buddhism, paying less attention to other important religious traditions for which it is also sacred, including Hinduism, Jainism, and the Indigenous Tibetan tradition of Bon. Mathieu includes an interesting discussion of the role Westerners have played in helping to elevate the sacred importance of Kailash to its widely perceived current pre-eminence—a relatively recent historical development. Some of the other mountains examined in

detail in succeeding chapters include Tai Shan in China, Paektusan in the Korean Peninsula, Mount Rushmore in the United States, Kilimanjaro in Africa, and Uluru in Australia. In keeping with his primary interest in the history of political and social developments, Mathieu examines, for example, how the sacred mountain of Paektusan has been used to keep alive the spirit of the revolution in North Korea and legitimize the transfer of leadership within the Kim family. In a similar vein, he discusses how the enormous 'superhuman' faces of US Presidents blasted onto the face of Mount Rushmore have been perceived as enshrining sacred values of democracy, which he contrasts with the more genuine sacredness of the Black Hills for the Lakota, the colonial subjugation of American Indians, and the recent revival and interest in Indigenous traditions and practices in the United States.

The third part, 'The Journey Continues', sums up the findings of the book, applies them to various issues, and makes tentative predictions about the future of sacred mountains. Its single chapter discusses sacred mountains in relation to various topics: religion and the environment around the world, issues around colonialism, gender roles that restrict women's access to certain mountains, and skeptical observations about the relevance of mountain sacredness for environmental protection. In the final section of the chapter, titled 'Mount Sacred—The Twenty-first Century', Mathieu argues for the diversity of sacred mountains and predicts that the future of what 'Mount Sacred' represents will vary depending on the particular mountain under consideration, where some mountains will retain their sacredness while others will lose it.

The historical approach of the book is interesting and useful, but somewhat limited in dealing with the depth and complexity of the many diverse ways in which people have experienced and found meaning in sacred mountains. This approach, along with the selection of a relatively small number of mountains to illustrate the author's main points, results in a rather cramped view of what makes a mountain sacred. Mathieu appears, for example, to downplay or dismiss mountains that are not revered primarily as sacred features of nature but instead derive their sacredness from major religious and spiritual events that have taken place on them, from the presence of holy chapels, hermitages, monasteries, and churches, or from associations with venerated saints and prophets, such as Saint Patrick, Moses, and Elijah. This may have led him to make the overgeneralization that 'For a long time, Christianity wanted little or nothing to do with sacred mountains', despite a number of important counterexamples such as Jebel Musa (Mountain of Moses) in the Sinai, Mount Ararat (for Armenian Christians) in Turkey, the Holy Mountain of Athos in Greece, Mount Tabor and the Mount of Olives in Israel, Croagh Patrick in Ireland, and the Sacri Monti in Italy.

Mount Sacred will be of primary interest to historians. The book is a valuable source of historical information on the sacred mountains covered in the text for those interested in how these mountains have related to political and social developments. Within the parameters of his approach and his selection of mountain cases, the author demonstrates impressive scholarship.

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