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Book Review

Kerry Mitchell, *Spirituality and the State: Managing Nature and Experience in America's National Parks* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), xi + 247 pp., $30 (pbk), ISBN: 9781479873012.

In *Spirituality and the State* Kerry Mitchell explores public religion in the United States through a study of the public lands of Yosemite National Park, Muir Woods, and the John Muir Trail. Through an analysis of the organization of physical space and cultural experience in the parks and through interviews with park visitors and rangers, Mitchell argues that the National Park Service manages the parks to foster religious (or spiritual) experience and that visitors experience the parks as spiritual and respond with increased allegiance to the state. His argument depends on his interweaving of spirituality as individual and public religion as liberal/individual (rather than Republican/civic), as well as the power of the hidden religious in the secular state.

Throughout the book Mitchell develops a useful understanding of 'spiritual', which he effectively defines as a word that cannot be pinned down. He sees this not as a defect, but as a useful 'socially productive' (p. 7) referent that many individuals can confirm without having to agree on specifics. This spirituality connected with nature in the parks becomes for him an example of public religion, and his assertion is that the state manipulates people's experience of the parks so they have this spiritual experience that affirms the state's authority over them. This religious work performed by the parks is usually implicit rather than explicit, and thus is invisible, working in the subconscious without prompting a rejection of such manipulation or the authorities who engineer it.

Crucial to Mitchell's argument is that the spirituality the state tries to create is individual rather than collective in nature. The parks encourage people, through the scenic views they are given as they drive into Yosemite Valley or as they walk into Cathedral Grove in Muir Woods, to experience a sense of something that is beyond them but that they are a part of and which cannot be communicated. Because a group of people are having this experience and doing so on government land, Mitchell labels this public religion. He uses resources on civil/public religion and new religious movements in useful ways to advance his arguments and to differentiate his approach and conclusions from other scholars, particularly Wade Clark Roof, Robert Wuthnow, Leigh Schmidt, and Robert Bellah. His reflections on individualism and liberalism particularly add to their work. Mitchell's claim is that the invisible power of the state to manipulate visitors comes from its wearing the mantle of secularity while inspiring people to have a spiritual experience of nature that will lead them to affirm the authority of the state as being the will of nature, rather than simply the rule of law. By gaining this acquiescence at a pre-conscious level, there is no room for discussion or

the consideration of alternatives. The state, he says, 'wears nature as a glove' (p. 192). Mitchell engages scholars of secularity such as Talal Asad, Tracy Fessenden, and Charles Taylor, and suggests that his work adds to the conversation by ground testing prevalent discourses about secularization against ethnographic data from these ostensibly secular state-sponsored parks.

Mitchell begins his discussion by giving a brief history of the development of national parks, focusing on the documents that show the parks' evolution through time, identifying the stages as recreation, heritage, and systems. In the earlier stages of this evolutionary progression, he points to both nationalistic and religious language that informs the documents. The systems approach, developed in the mid-twentieth century, refuses 'to privilege one perspective' over another and he says this may be the reason religious language drops out (p. 40). He argues that keeping 'symbolic capital' hidden may make it more powerful (p. 54). This argument from silence is less than compelling. Further, what he is showing us in the systems period up to the Vail Agenda in 1992 is an increasing diversity and complexity of stakeholders, which seems to argue against manipulation toward a common (if individual) experience. Had he looked at the next two decades in park management even more of this would be obvious, as the incorporation of an ecosystem approach has forced the parks to rethink the very framework on which the national park idea was founded.

Mitchell also includes histories of individual parks and descriptions and interpretations of the spaces that visitors encounter. The areas are very different, from the wilderness experience of the John Muir Trail, to the crowded Yosemite Valley and expansive Tuolumne Meadows, to the more contained and controlled Muir Woods. In each case he asks his interviewees about their own religious life and how it does or does not relate to their experience in the national park. He further queries the rangers about what role religion/spirituality should have in the parks. Most of the rangers agree that that is not their job, nor would it be appropriate to talk about religion, but beyond that, a wide range of experiences, which some agree to call spiritual, comes out of his surveys and the longer follow-up phone interviews he conducted. The results do reinforce his point—what the individuals experience is very individual. What seems less clear is whether the state sought to create this experience and if so how it is augmenting its power. In the chapter on 'Theorizing Religious Individualism' Mitchell tries to take this on as well as bringing his various arguments together, all of which bring to the fore questions with which the study of religions in the United States must deal.

Mitchell says the book is about the invisibility of spirituality and the invisibility of operations of power in the public sphere. He has no desire to make the invisible spiritual visible, though he does have to convince us it is there. He does want to make the invisible workings of the state visible so they can be brought into discourse. The one section of the book that seemed to fit least well with Mitchell's thesis—the John Muir trail—may cast some light on the state's invisible power. The state does little there except keep the trails in order and discourage littering. The hikers are there because they want to be on their own and seem least dependent on the state for shaping their spiritual experience of wilderness. The author writes beautifully and powerfully about their wilderness experience. Perhaps it is here that the state has the most power over me and him, too. Maybe we both 'know' the value of wilderness in a way that precludes argument, and even though we won't join them, we want those long-distance hikers to have the 'unadulterated' space where they can do it. Perhaps

Kerry Mitchell and I both want that land to be maintained as wilderness and are not really interested in a conversation that might consider other uses for that land. Is this the state's manipulation? Or perhaps the larger culture's that the state is also subject to? Mitchell's questions are well worth serious consideration as the changing climate and the ever-increasing diversity of our culture raise even more questions about the public lands of the United States.

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