
Book Review

Mark Stoll, *Inherit the Holy Mountain: Religion and the Rise of American Environmentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 406 pp., \$39.95 (hbk), ISBN: 978-0-19-023086-9.

In this book, the environmental historian Mark Stoll adroitly brings readers on a pilgrimage around the holy mountain of US environmentalism to demonstrate how US religious production, especially from the early 1800s onward, has shaped this environmentalism. In Stoll's reading, the 'holy mountain' of environmentalism that has been inherited in the US reflects a designed landscape, both physical and cultural, thoroughly shaped by a Protestant religious heritage developed over generations by leading artists, activists, and politicians. The amount of data contained in *Inherit the Holy Mountain* is staggering and sets a high bar for scholarship on religion and environmental history. As Stoll explains, the book was 'a project...long in the making', with its seeds planted while teaching a 1987 graduate seminar (p. xi).

Stoll uses a wide range of historical and contemporary documents to undertake his research project, which is to investigate the 'correlations between people's origins in specific denominations and certain attitudes toward nature and the environment' in the United States (p. 1). This interplay is of central concern to scholarship represented in this journal, and the book does a thorough job in providing copious data that helps provide examples of such correlations, stretching over 300 years of US environmental history. Stoll utilizes art history; conservation, forestry, and environmental history; theological history, both European and US; and European and US religious history for his literature review. Stoll's use of primary (and secondary) sources is stunning—it is obvious to this reader that 30 years of collecting primary sources on religion and US environmental history went into this book. These sources include songs and hymns; letters; diaries; periodicals; political speeches; newspapers; biographies; sermons; publishers' records and book sales figures; church records, including catechisms, sermons, and speeches; essays; graduation speeches; historical addresses given to various societies; theological treatises; interviews; and autobiographies.

Stoll's ability to plumb the depths of this rich variety of sources to find great quotes and passages, including ones from many environmental luminaries, and present them in a new light adds to the scholarly literature on both famous and more obscure religious figures in US environmental history. Stoll surveys this terrain in 275 pages, followed by almost 40 pages of notes and almost 60 of bibliography. There are eight chapters in the book, as well as an Introduction and Conclusion. In the Introduction Stoll alerts readers that his focus will be on 'the significance of religious upbringing... of the leading figures in the history of American environmentalism' as he is convinced that 'there must be some close relationship between religion and environmentalism'

in the US (p. 2). His method for understanding 'nature' as a term, and how various denominations have conceived of and taught about nature, is also shared in these introductory pages. He summarizes key 'surprises' that emerged in his research as he used his various sources to overlay American environmental history onto American religious history (p. 6). Stoll justifies his project to both historians and religionists who focus on US environmental history by offering something new compared to other works: 'as this book shows, a religious perspective gives the history and development of environmentalism a trajectory, unity, and power. Rather unexpectedly, even to the author, religion turns out to provide extraordinary insights into the environmental movement's past—and future' (p. 9).

According to Stoll, this past begins in the 1500s with the theology of John Calvin and how Calvin's theology subsequently influenced Reformed Protestantism's 'themes of beauty of creation, nature's effortless praise of the Creator, blissful Eden, postlapsarian misery and sin, and hopes for salvation' (p. 20). Calvin conceived of a God who acted in nature such that 'Nature was egalitarian', and Reformed Protestants built upon this theological foundation 'evidence of the being and attributes of God everywhere from the wide heavens to the smallest blade of grass' (p. 24). Puritans added this understanding of the Book of Nature to concerns of a morally upright common society so that New England Congregationalists and then Presbyterians in the northeast developed by the 1800s a 'Reformed Edenic ideal of landscape' (p. 94). This ideal was a key foundation for conceiving of the New England town as one that is morally coherent where part of this moral and godly universe was the surrounding natural landscape that had to be actively conserved and protected. Here, according to Stoll, lies the seed of US conservationism—in the religious leaders of Reformed Protestantism in New England and the Northeast. He argues, 'The Congregationalists of the Connecticut Valley and the New England diaspora would give the nation conservation in all its aspects: parks, which preserved God's natural world for the benefit of the people; forestry, which conserved natural resources for the common good; and agricultural improvement, which conserved the soil... They also midwived the birth of ecology' (p. 52). In support of this argument, Stoll shares page after page of (white, male, often elite) Reformed Protestant Congregationalist and then Presbyterian leaders who were theologically motivated to spearhead protection of nature at local, state, and federal levels.

Of key import is that the data mined by Stoll's historical sleuthing suggests that the hundreds of figures involved in developing US environmentalism in this era were indeed religiously inspired. However, Stoll makes it clear that the religious support of environmental causes that emerged from New England and the Northeast and spread first with Congregationalists and then Presbyterians throughout the 1800s peaked in the early 1900s. By this time a competing theological view of nature had emerged from New England's 'outsiders' of the 1800s and this theological view came to dominate US environmentalism in the mid-1900s onwards, with severe repercussions for today's US environmental movement. These outsider views, beginning with Henry David Thoreau, John Burroughs, and continuing through Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, Edward Abbey, E.O. Wilson, Al Gore, and Wendell Berry, stressed salvation and conversion, individual freedom and morality, and finding one's self in a pure natural setting that provides the foil to a fallen society. In this theological view, nature is not to be conserved as part of a larger communal project of developing a morally just and godly society, but rather it is the place for individuals to go to get away from

a fallen society. For Stoll, the former view mobilized a broad political movement, up to the federal level, to preserve and protect the natural world. However, with the rise of this 'other' theological view (along with views from other religions, like Catholicism, Judaism, African American Christianities, and Wicca), the movement to protect nature through law and broad-based religious appeal lost its momentum.

Stoll ends the book by taking up Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus's 2004 argument about the death of environmentalism. When looking backward at the ferment and theological interest in nature that motivated Congregationalists and Presbyterians from the late 1700s through the early 1900s, and comparing that history with the last 50 years of environmentalism, Stoll feels that 'Those who advocate converting everyone to the proper attitude toward the land community, or the earth, or the universe, in hopes of an environmental millennium, evince an optimism toward human possibility for which history provides little supporting evidence' (p. 273). Stoll points out that the focus on morality, equity, and the common good that mobilized Reformed Protestantism in the New England and Connecticut regions, where US environmentalism as a theological and effective political movement was birthed, is no longer a unifying or motivating voice for US environmentalism. More so, humans no longer organize themselves along such concerns; instead, today's omnipotent advertising has structured society so that 'Mammon, one might say, has the bulkiest pulpit of all' (p. 275). It is this new reality that Stoll feels will over-determine US environmental history in the coming years, at least until environmentalism is no longer 'weak, divided, and wandering in the wilderness' (p. 275).

Two minor quibbles emerged as I read this book. The first is that Stoll's sources are almost entirely white male Protestants; women, Jews, Catholics, and African Americans briefly show up toward the end. Given the subject matter, this is largely unavoidable, but a bit more reflection on this reality would have helped soothe the redundancy of such sources. In addition, some readers may pause to consider whether the evidence selected and presented supports a pre-existing thesis, or whether the data was so overwhelming as to disallow any other possible thesis and analysis than that presented in the book (I side with the latter, given the sheer amount of evidence utilized). With these two quibbles aside, this book deserves to be on the bookshelf of any serious scholar of religion and nature. If the geographic region of focus is the United States, then the book is mandatory. The impressive amount of data covered in its pages, and the cohesive narrative that contextualizes and analyzes this data, cannot be captured in a 1,600-word book review. Scholars owe Stoll a debt of gratitude for the 30 years of dedication to crafting this thorough treatment of the impact religion has had on environmentalism in the US. This gratitude should begin with the assignment of this book in graduate seminars devoted to interactions between religion and nature, where it can provide a shining example of scholarship toward which future leaders of the field should aspire.

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