



Thomas R. Dunlap. *Faith in Nature: Environmentalism as Religious Quest.* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004. 224 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-295-98397-4.

Reviewed by Mark R. Stoll (Department of History, Texas Tech University)

Published on H-Environment (September, 2004)

Thinking about Environmentalism as a Religion

Thomas R. Dunlap conceived of writing *Faith in Nature: Environmentalism as Religious Quest* after watching the audience response to William Cronon's American Society for Environmental History conference paper, "The Trouble with Wilderness." At this tumultuous and controversial event, Cronon made the point that the concept of "wilderness" is a historical and cultural product that shapes the way we interact with nature. Dunlap noted the passion with which academics objected that wilderness had objective reality, and that by questioning that reality Cronon, in effect, gave ammunition to opponents of wilderness. To Dunlap's mind, "the historians seemed like Christian fundamentalists listening to an historical-critical talk on the Bible. The speaker might be a Christian by his own lights, but in viewing the Holy Scriptures as products of the times and the records of God's Words, he showed himself an apostate" (p. 3).

Dunlap has elaborated this insight in a gracefully written and thoughtful book that traces the moral and spiritual aspects of American environmentalism. His thesis should stimulate some self-examination as well as further work on this way of viewing the environmental movement. Quite accessible, *Faith in Nature* should also work well as a discussion starter in both the undergraduate and graduate classroom.

After an introduction that lays out the issues and touches on the author's own religious background [Catholics on his mother's side and "a long line of bigoted Ulster Protestants" (p. 7) on his father's] and values, a chapter entitled "Newton's Disciples" discusses the ratio-

nalist trust in science that dates to the Enlightenment and underlies society's faith in Progress as well as environmentalism's dependence on science and reason. Dunlap holds out E. O. Wilson, Gregg Easterbrook, and Björn Lomborg, among others, as representatives of this view. Yet, he notes, "Environmentalism accepted the universe on the basis of reason but also looked for a personal relationship with nature, which came to mean wild country, that yielded insight into the universe" (p. 40). The second chapter, "Emerson's Children," traces the source of this "personal relationship" to the Romantic element that inspired many of American environmentalism's "pantheon": Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and John Muir in particular, but also such prophets as John Burroughs, Robinson Jeffers, George Perkins Marsh, and Aldo Leopold. In their works, the spiritual and moral elements of environmentalism found their classic expression.

The third chapter, "Journey into Sacred Space," is the book's heart. To Dunlap, the idea of wilderness, of the wild space without people, constitutes the central, essential element in environmentalism's spiritual quest for insight into the meaning of the world. Here he analyzes the rise and fall of the twentieth-century wilderness movement. As it moves through the history of the wilderness movement, the chapter begins with founders of the wilderness movement like Leopold, Arthur Carhart, and Robert Marshall; singles out Sigurd Olson's sacralization of wilderness; takes up the way wilderness entered the Sierra Club's goals and mainstream environmentalism in the 1950s and 1960s; notes the radicalization of wilder-

ness defense in the 1980s; and ends with a summary of the debate in the groves of academia and in the pages of the journal *Wild Earth* and the book edited by William Cronon, *Uncommon Ground* (1996). The author views this controversy primarily as a defense of “sacred wilderness,” that is a response to the questioning of a deeply held value and source of meaning.

The fourth and fifth chapters, “Sacred Nature Enters Daily Life” and “In for the Long Haul: Living in the World,” describe the way environmentalists change their habits and consumption to guide daily life by environmental values. Dunlap notes how pesticide scares and alarmist books like Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962) and Paul Ehrlich’s *Population Bomb* (1968) as well as visionary works like Ernest Callenbach’s *Ecotopia* (1974) and *The Whole Earth Catalog* (many editions) brought environmental concerns and values into people’s consciousness and daily lives. Dunlap observes how closely the need to change values and habits resembles religious conversion and a new life. Environmentalists struggled to find the proper method for living lightly and promoted influential concepts like the bioregionalism of Gary Snyder and Wendell Berry and the “deep ecology” of Arne Naess, Bill Devall, and George Sessions. Dunlap calls ecology the central “myth” of environmentalism, because while it seemed to give an objective, scientific foundation to environmental goals, ecological theory itself was moving away from the old ideas of land communities, integrity, and stability on which environmentalism relied. Environmentalists then faced the problem of how to live in the world after the fire and fervor have cooled. The question of how environmentalism and economics relate lead to discussions of *Limits to Growth* and E. F. Schumacher’s *Small Is Beautiful* (1973). Michael Pollan’s *Second Nature* (1992) and Sara Stein’s *Noah’s Garden* (1993) shifted the focus from wilderness to the wildness in one’s backyard, and Robert Pyle’s *The Thunder Tree* (1993) and Robert Sullivan’s *Meadowlands* (1998) sought nature in urban settings. Like a religion, environmentalism assembled its own canon of sacred writings (Thoreau, Muir, Carson, Leopold), its own icons (photographs by Ansel Adams or Eliot Porter), its own totems (wolves, grizzly bears, and salmon), and its own virtues and calls for humility before something greater. Dunlap sees a trajectory for environmentalism from activism to accomplishment and then to the confusion and contradictions in an “engagement with ... deeper questions” (p. 147).

Dunlap’s final chapter poses the question, “what now.” After a summary of the major challenges and paradoxes in the American environmental movement, he con-

cludes with an assertion of the importance of recognizing the spiritual and moral aspects of environmentalism, which he believes would strengthen the environmentalist cause and allow environmentalists to better confront their opponents. Here he provides a thoughtful conclusion to a perceptive analysis of the moral dimensions of certain styles of American environmentalism.

Faith in Nature, curiously, may be subject to objections similar to those that historians raised against “The Trouble with Wilderness.” At a café in Tucson, Arizona, Tom Dunlap and I discussed this book in its early stages, which he told me somewhat tentatively would be about “environmentalism as a religion.” Admittedly, I first reacted with reservations, because Christian conservatives already have accused environmentalism of being a religion. Would this book not give aid and comfort to these anti-environmentalists? I, too, had listened to Cronon deliver his paper at the ASEH conference; I recognized, along with Cronon, that “wilderness” is a cultural value and I also perceived, along with the critics, that his analysis was an implicit attack on that value. We are like the audience at the musical “Peter Pan”: if we believe in wilderness and clap, wilderness will survive. To analyze something is to dispel its mystery. People become environmentalists because they believe environmentalism is true. Recognition that environmentalism is a quest for religious values, it seems to me, is thus unlikely to strengthen it. This is not a criticism, however. To speak the truth about wilderness or environmentalism is what scholars must do. Both Cronon and Dunlap have raised questions that ought to be investigated and answered. “Environmentalism” is a historical movement that may one day vanish—it is not an Eternal Truth to be guarded from the forces of darkness.

A more significant criticism of this book is that its conception is quite narrow. It is, to continue the metaphor, a “denominational” history. Denominational histories can give insight, but tend not to look at outside influences or to compare parallel developments in other denominations. American environmentalism as a moral movement with political, social, and cultural implications has many sibling movements drawn, in general, from the same classes, regions, and religious denominations: temperance, abolitionism, woman suffrage, civil rights, and the peace movement, for example. Investigation of the similarities, differences, and frequent interrelationships with these movements would provide many fruitful insights. Dunlap has chosen to look only at the figures within the environmentalism, many of whose names environmental historians will find quite familiar.

Dunlap also narrowly assumes “environmentalism” means “American environmentalism.” He almost entirely ignores its international aspects (with the exception of the identification of philosopher Arne Naess as Norwegian, p. 116). Green movements in other countries merit but a single sentence (p. 96) and are presented as offspring of the American movement, which would surprise many a European environmental historian. The reader might never know that environmentalists from the beginning engaged in a lively transatlantic exchange of ideas. Dunlap depicts Emerson bringing forth Transcendentalism fully formed, never mind his forerunners in this country or his debt to Coleridge, Wordsworth, Goethe, and Schelling (whose philosophy Emerson’s so resembles that some scholars believe Emerson borrowed it). Other examples come to mind: Muir’s rambles found inspiration in the travels of the German Alexander von Humboldt and the Scot Mungo Park, and he discovered Romanticism from English poets long before reading Emerson or Thoreau; German, Danish, Russian, and British scientists made essential contributions in the early decades of ecology; E. F. Schumacher was German; and so forth. These and many more international connections complicate the issue of environmentalism’s “religious” character. Here is an opportunity for Dunlap or others to broaden the analysis, because international environmentalism is no less a moral movement than the American, but with a different spirituality (or, often, none at all), a different morality, and little or no place for wilderness.

Dunlap’s portrait of environmentalism also depicts just one current, and with a sort of synecdoche identifies it with the entire stream of environmental thought. Environmentalism is not really one “denomination” but a cluster of denominations, some of which have little or no interest in wilderness at all. In the 1980s, while Earth First! and Dave Foreman garnered headlines defending wilderness, the anti-nuclear movement was in full swing, stopping nuclear plants across the country, and poor black residents of Warren County, North Carolina, protested a new dump in an action that launched the environmental justice movement. A greater sensitivity to other incoming streams would bring out moral themes other than the (rather Protestant) spiritual value of wilderness that Dunlap foregrounds. Somewhat problematically, he includes these streams as “moral” without being able to connect them with his primary theme of “religious quest.” Leopold’s “land ethic” owes little to Muir or Thoreau; Marshall, Pollan, Paul Ehrlich, Barry Commoner, and Murray (not “Jeremy,” p. 167) Bookchin and

others bring elements of a recognizably Jewish sensibility to environmentalism; Schumacher (to whom wilderness was never the important issue) was Catholic; and so forth. The most social environmental “denomination” is the environmental justice movement along with its antecedents, and it does not appear in any form in *Faith in Nature*. Issues of greater concern to women and minorities, such as toxic waste or urban pollution, form no part of Dunlap’s “environmentalism,” which instead concentrates on the more masculine interest of wilderness.

Greater awareness of religious studies literature would lend greater depth to the analysis. Dunlap believes religious background important enough to discuss in detail in his own case, yet oddly he rarely investigates the influence of religious upbringing on the moral and spiritual beliefs of environmentalists. It is interesting and suggestive that most of the wilderness worshippers descended from “bigoted Ulster Protestants” (that is, Presbyterians) or from their equally bigoted Calvinist New England brethren. Emerson, Thoreau, Marsh, Muir, Burroughs, Gifford Pinchot, Jeffers, Carson, and many other prominent environmentalists came from this branch of Protestantism. Pinchot, by the way, deserves much more credit than Dunlap gives him (a brief passage on p. 33). Many founders of the Wilderness Society, among them Leopold and Marshall, worked in the Forest Service, which Pinchot imbued on its founding with a strong New England moralism. They thus enter the story from a very different path than the Muir tradition, one more moral or ethical than spiritual. Neither Leopold (secular Lutheran) nor Marshall (secular Jew) valued wilderness much for its Muir-style spiritual values.

Actually, it might be better to speak of “environmentalisms,” rather than “environmentalism,” in order to recognize the wide variety of environmental perspectives and goals. Dunlap’s analysis gets fuzzy when he fails to notice that, while the environmentalists he discusses all view nature from a moral perspective, many would balk at following the spiritual quest into the wilderness. Pollan and Sara Stein for example would rather work in their gardens. The apparent narrowness of Dunlap’s analysis reflects his viewpoint from within the movement, as a bonafide member of the environmentalist “denomination.” The book’s language accepts the moralistic division of the world into the environmentalists and the self-interested: good vs. evil. While some anti-environmentalists perhaps are indeed merely greedy, selfish plunderers of the natural world, most see themselves as working in some sense for some good. In

other words, anti-environmentalism has a moral perspective as well. For example, between Earth First! and its archnemesis Charles Hurwitz of Maxxam and the Pacific Lumber Co. lies not a vast gulf akin to the Miltonic darkness of Chaos and Old Night that Satan had to cross to get to Eden. Rather between them lies a spectrum of environmental attitudes in which one moral and spiritual viewpoint shades into the next. Somewhere along that spectrum lies the patriotic, guntoting, churchgoing, Sierra Club-hating Texas rancher who claims to love the

land his family has owned and worked for generations. This is a view of the environment that does not fit easily into a book about religious quests.

All of this expands on Dunlap's central insight that environmentalism is a moral and spiritual movement, although certainly a "religious quest" only for some. If it does not ask all questions, if it does not follow all lines of inquiry to their ends, *Faith in Nature* has asked the first question, and gives a thoughtful—and thought-provoking—answer.

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Citation: Mark R. Stoll. Review of Dunlap, Thomas R., *Faith in Nature: Environmentalism as Religious Quest*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. September, 2004.

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