
Van Houtan, K. S. and Northcott, M. S.

2010

In: Diversity and Dominion: Dialogues in Ecology, Ethics, and Theology.

Van Houtan, K. S. and Northcott, M. S. (Eds.)

pp. 138-156

Cascade Books

Eugene, Oregon
Seven

Nature and the Nation-state

*Ambivalence, Evil, and American Environmentalism*

**Kyle S. Van Houtan and Michael S. Northcott**

And they talked of the land behind them. I don't know what it's coming to, they said. The country's spoilt. It'll come back though, only we won't be there. Maybe, they thought, maybe we sinned some way we didn't know about. (1951: 271)

—John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*
Figure 7: St. Jerome and the Lion. Roger van der Weyden. Oil on oak panel. Used with permission of The Detroit Institute of Arts.
Diversity and Dominion

Walking through the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC we were struck by the number of images of Saint Jerome on display. Depicted in various settings, Saint Jerome is seen writing at his desk with a lion coiled at his feet, engaged in prayer at the entrance to a cave, performing acts of self-mortification, or—most notably—in a reference to the classical tale of Androcles, plucking a thorn from a lion’s paw. Weyden’s painting of Saint Jerome in this chapter shows him in two poses at once. In the upper left corner of the painting he is engaging in an act of penance, using a rock to chastise his flesh. Like the Christian desert fathers before him, Jerome is using the wild to subdue his bodily desires and heal his soul. But at the same time, Jerome is depicted as an archetype of a new relationship with the wild where human holiness confers harmony and peace between man and beast and the wild is tamed. Even the king of beasts—the lion—recognizes the authority of this saint, coming to him for healing, drawn by his holiness.

Weyden’s image wonderfully captures the duality in the Christian tradition of the human relation to creation. From the Gospel narratives of the life of Christ, through the stories of the desert fathers and saints, the tradition attests to a cosmological reordering which sees the resurrected body of Christ as first fruit of a “new creation” in which the whole cosmos is recapitulated and Christians are set in a new relationship with the nonhuman world;—one that is nonviolent and harmonious. This new creation, and nature as a whole, is seen as a domain that is still subject to the exigencies of sin and that Christians are called both to subdue and to redeem, by their quest for sanctification, and by their work in the world.

The long artistic tradition of portraits of Saint Jerome intertwines the concepts of human dominion over nature with a saintly capacity to engender compassion and healing in the human and larger-than-human world. An analogous duality may be observed in the pioneering conceptions of nature of two North American conservationists, John Muir and Gifford Pinchot. Symbolizing starkly different philosophies of nature conservation, Muir and Pinchot began as friends, united in their zeal to stem the widespread deforestation that affected the United States in the 1800s (Nash 1982). But their friendship was short lived, and their different approaches to land use and wilderness eventually made them bitter public enemies. The terms of their debates are important as they continue to mark American attitudes to nature conservation today (Meyer 1997, Smith 1998).
In his journals and letters John Muir describes the cathedral-like rocks, giant sequoias, and flowery meadows of the Californian Sierra Nevada as sacred. As for Jerome, the wilderness for Muir is a place of bodily asceticism and soul therapy. But Muir goes far beyond Jerome in his account of the presence of the divine in the pristine landscape of wilderness. In a letter to his transcendentalist mentor, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Muir invites Emerson, “in a month’s worship with Nature in the high temples of the great Sierra Crown beyond our holy Yosemite” (quoted in Rusk 1994: 154–55). In making this claim, Muir articulates a new ecological sensibility in American nature writing: the Protestant God is remapped onto the wild lands of America, the wilderness becomes a savior, and liberal Protestant piety finds its incarnation through an ecstatic engagement with the natural sublime (Stoll 1993). It is as if the remnant of untouched or wild land is the only place where atonement may be found from the carnage the colonists had wrought on its previous inhabitants, and the heedless exploitation of so much of its forest, minerals, and soil. Whereas the portraits of Jerome indicate that the saintly man has become the healer of the world, for Muir it is the reverse: the holiness of wilderness becomes the source of the healing of man, and of Muir.

Muir commenced his long wilderness walks after an industrial accident that had nearly blinded him. This was a pivotal event in his life that led, after a period of sickness and depression, to a kind of conversion experience: as his sight returned he felt that he had “arisen from the grave,” and the purpose of this rising was that he might put his eyes to their proper use, which was to seek the glory of God reflected in the wonders of God’s creation. Muir felt the divine hand was pushing him out “into heaven’s light” to start on a “long excursion” into the wild. As he put it in a letter to his employers, “God has to nearly kill us sometimes, to teach us lessons” (Stoll 1993). After recovering his sight, Muir gave up his intended work as an industrial inventor, bid farewell to his family who had emigrated from Scotland to the Wisconsin territory, and walked to the Gulf of Mexico. Thereafter, he traveled to California’s Yosemite valley, from where his rhapsodic written dispatches to newspapers and magazines on the East Coast earned him fame and sufficient income to sustain him in the struggle he eventually took up to save the wilderness from
Diversity and Dominion

the lumberjack, the miner, and the shepherd. Like a latter day John the Baptist, with his long flowing beard and wilderness lifestyle, Muir took up with evangelical fervor the role of preacher and prophet to industrialists, politicians, and the general public. His message was that the preservation of the wild lands of America was God's good work. According to Muir's nature gospel, the light of God shone from the ranges and valleys of the mountains and forests, and hence saving nature from exploitation would manifest salvation for Americans in this new land. Eventually for Muir, the wilderness usurps the cathedral and becomes the sacred place in which religious piety is truly stirred, the sentiment that is seen in this account of dusk falling in the Sierra Nevada:

Now came the solemn, silent evening. Long, blue, spiky shadows crept out across the snow-fields, while a rosy glow, at first scarce discernible, gradually deepened and suffused every mountain-top, flushing the glaciers and the harsh crags above them. This was the alpenglow, to me one of the most impressive of all the terrestrial manifestations of God. At the touch of this divine light, the mountains seemed to kindle to a rapt, religious consciousness, and stood hushed and waiting like devout worshipers. (1911)

The core insight that passes from Muir’s wilderness piety into the American imagination is the idea that wild nature has the right to exist and flourish untamed (Muir 1911, Nash 1982). And as he molded this romantic ideal, first voiced by Thoreau and Emerson, into a national preservation ethic, Muir felt that the only hope for saving the forests from the rapacious demands of farmers, foresters, and miners was an intervention by the federal government of the United States:

Through all the wonderful eventful centuries since Christ's time and long before that God has cared for these trees, saved them from drought, diseases, avalanche and a thousand straining leveling tempests and floods, but he cannot save them from fools—only Uncle Sam can do that. (1897)

A contemporary of Muir’s, Gifford Pinchot also held deep-seated convictions about the future of America’s forests and wild lands, as evidenced through his key role in the establishment of what today is the United States Forest Service. Just as Muir helped popularize nature preservation through the federal system of parks and wilderness areas, Pinchot’s efforts helped institutionalize nature management through the system of national
Van Houtan and Northcott: Nature and the Nation-state

forests. In a classic example of Pinchot’s legacy, he skillfully maneuvered the transfer of the administration of forest reserves from the General Land Office of the Department of the Interior to the Division of Forestry in the Department of Agriculture, which he headed. In so doing, he convinced many in Washington, including his friend President Theodore Roosevelt, of his particular vision for conserving America’s forests (Williams 1989). For the Department of Agriculture, and for Pinchot, America’s wild forests were a merchantable crop. Where Muir saw intrinsic goodness and divine light in the unhewn primary forest and the untamed wild, Pinchot was a utilitarian for whom the forest was to serve the greater good of the American nation-state.

Pinchot’s testimony before a congressional committee over the proposed damming of the Hetch Hetchy Valley of Yosemite National Park is particularly revealing. Pinchot as conservationist supports the damming of the Tuolumne river precisely because this would transform an inaccessible and little visited valley into a reservoir for the rapidly growing city of San Francisco: “The fundamental principle of the whole conservation policy is that of use, to take every part of the land and its resources and put it to that use in which it will serve the most people” (quoted in Nash 1982: 171). Whereas for Muir nature serves humanity best in its primal state as a spiritual guide to wisdom divine, for Pinchot nature only serves humanity when industry puts its resources into productive use. So for Pinchot, wise conservation necessarily involves wise use. For Pinchot, like the American Puritans before him (Taylor 1989: 221–35), it is as if old-growth forests, and indeed nature writ large, were divinely intended to be instruments of human work, and are so sanctified through their use. A table made from wooden planks, therefore, sanctifies the tree from which the planks were cut, fulfilling its purpose, intended by its creator. For Muir, however, ancient trees stand on sacred ground, and in setting aside that ground to be preserved from human labor, Muir seeks to fashion a new Eden.

To their credit, the competing visions of Muir and Pinchot were both instrumental in helping to bring about the sequestration of large areas of the United States from industrial and real estate use and for nature conservation of one kind or another. Combined, national parks, forests, wilderness areas, and wildlife refuges represent nearly 400 million acres, or roughly one fifth of the land area of the United States that is under federal nature management. If these areas had not been established through
the convictions of Muir and Pinchot, there would potentially be fewer areas of the United States remaining that had not been logged, mined, ploughed under, or turned into real estate. Nonetheless their respective visions represent a profound ambivalence in the American ecological psyche;—the one giving rise to an aesthetic ethic of preservationism and what elsewhere we have called “wilderness fetishism” (e.g., Northcott 2002), the other promoting the instrumental value of nature as a human resource. Neither vision, however, nor the sequestration of such large land parcels has been able to prevent the ecological devastation of North America that began with the colonials and has been systematically advanced by the modern partnership of the nation-state and the economic corporation. The nation-state exercises an increasingly imperial dominion on the whole land of North America and its natural heritage. The ecological consequences have been dramatic: thousands of species have been pushed to the edge of extinction, water sullied, air toxified, aquifers drained, old-growth forests almost completely annihilated, native peoples extinguished, and oceans over-fished and over-burdened with topsoil and toxic waste washed from the industrial farms and factories of the American heartland (Pimm 2002).

Though the images of Jerome in the Washington National Gallery echo Muir’s idea of wilderness sanctity, the sheer number of acquisitions of this image—the gallery owns some 107 images of Jerome1—suggests to us a sense of guilt, and perhaps a desire to assuage American history of its ecological sins. The large number of these holdings may also suggest a fellow feeling of the colonists for Jerome. He was the first of the early Latin fathers to move to the Holy Land, and he was consequently the first Christian pilgrim and the key transitional figure between the Latin Christianity of the first three centuries and the wilderness traditions of the Desert Fathers of both East and West. The Desert fathers had left the compromises of imperial Christianity for the ascetic solitude of the desert, but their networks of cells and hermitages began to transform the desert into a holy city in which the first monasteries were founded and where the monastic gardens and farms of later eras find their origins (Chitty 1966). Intending to tame their souls in the wild the Desert Fathers through their holy communities began to tame the wild, and to see the desert bloom. Analogously, the Pilgrim Fathers left the Babylon of Europe

Van Houtan and Northcott: Nature and the Nation-state

for a Promised Land in which they would come to see themselves as a redeemer nation, redeeming the wild and untamed land of the New World by their industry and inventiveness, and redeeming the hemisphere from pagan religion and European colonialism. If Jerome is the first Pilgrim Father whose sanctity enables him to tame the wild, he is in this sense the patron saint of the American nature imagination. For the various icons of Jerome symbolize both Pinchot's nature tamed and Muir's holy wilderness. And this connection may point to an important problematic feature of Muir's vision of wilderness. For in romanticizing the American wilderness, Muir turns the mountains and forests he loved into a totem of American nationhood, and of the nation-state's colonization of the wild.

WENDELL BERRY AND ECOLOGICAL EVIL

The ambiguity of the colonists' taming of America is brilliantly evoked in the title of Wendell Berry's classic monograph *The Unsettling of America* (1983). According to Berry, the agrarian revolution of the last fifty years in American and global agriculture is unsettling as it dissolves and destroys the earlier agrarian community of land and people that the first colonists had established. The root of the destructive tendencies of American industrialism is not Americans' unwillingness to set aside wild nature to preserve it for posterity, but the duplicity of modern institutions. These institutions in one hand claim to steward the creation, through setting aside parks and preserves, yet with the other hand plot widespread nature destruction. Berry ascribes the motive power of this destruction to the triumvirate forces of the nation-state, science, and the economic corporation in the forms respectively of the United States Department of Agriculture, the modern university, and industry. The partnership of these forces generates a style of agriculture that is deeply disrespectful of fauna and flora, field and forest, while also deeply destructive of agrarian culture and of the traditional relationship of the cultures of food and farming communities.

Here Berry is firmly at odds with Pinchot's state-mediated utilitarian ethic. But, importantly, he also opposes the nation-state as the primary defender of the wild in the setting aside by federal and state governments of parts of nature as parks and wilderness areas. State protection of these delimited areas of the wild is merely the reverse side of its systematic utilitarian abuse of the rest of the land, and may even advance it by pro-
Diversity and Dominion

viding the state with the acquired sanctity of conserver of the nation's symbolic wild lands. Here Berry is opposed to elements of the wilderness ethic of Muir and what he sees as its formative role in the environmental psyche of modern America. If the wilderness ideal helps to produce a situation where the only sacred ecological spaces are institutionalized, then it colludes in the narrowing of an environmental ethic to one that views parks and wilderness areas as sacred, while the remaining natural areas are relegated as profane space, left for industrial desecration. In a pointed passage, Berry writes:

Idolatry always reduces to the worship of something “made with hands,” something confined within the terms of human work and human comprehension. Thus, Solomon and Saint Paul both insisted on the largeness and at-largeness of God, setting Him free, so to speak, from ideas about Him. He is not to be fenced in, under human control like a domestic creature; He is the wildest being in existence . . . That is why the subduing of things of nature to human purposes is so dangerous and why it so often results in evil, in separation and desecration. (1993: 101)

It is in this sense that the wilderness becomes a fetish and is incorporated in the larger totemic civil religion of the American nation (Marvin and Ingle 1996). Like other totems, this fetish mystifies the myriad ecological sacrifices that the nation-state elsewhere requires through its advancing of the corporate and consumer economy. The idea of wilderness cannot ultimately save nature from the instrumental dominion of the nation-state since, as a national or state park, the wilderness is also fenced in, subjected to government purposes and instrumental control, something that Edward Abbey records and protests in Desert Solitaire while working as a park ranger in Utah (1985). The black top roads and camp grounds that the National Parks Service rolled out through desert and forest effectively tamed the wild in the effort to draw car driving urbanites into the parks.

The crucial failing in the competing philosophies of Muir and Pinchot is that when married to the nation-state both produce forms of nature conservation that collude in the larger imperial conquest of

2. Here, Berry echos the prophet Isaiah: "Their land is full of silver and gold, there is no limit to their treasures; their land is full of horses, there is no limit to their chariots. And their land is full of idols; they bow down to the work of their hands, to what their own fingers have wrought." (Is 2:7–8, Tanakh trans.)
nature. Thus modern silviculture of the kind advanced by Pinchot and the National Forest Service he founded is an exemplar of the collectivizing and reductionist tendencies of the science-informed nation-state. The forest of the forester is a monocrop designed so that it can be easily quantified and hence subjected to the accountant’s rule. Although the plantation forest is less efficient than its more diverse counterpart, and less able to sustain life and to provide a range of goods for the builder, the fisherman, and the hunter, the forester looks on serried ranks of trees as a bankable economic resource (Scott 1999). Analogously the wilderness reserve is managed by rangers who, through the culling of certain species and the reintroduction of others, attempt to restore the wild and, through information centers and roads, to make it available for human enjoyment. Both ideologies legitimate technocratic forms of control of nature that are intrinsically exploitative and reductionist. They both represent and sustain the alienation of industrial civilization from nature and its systematic onslaught on biodiversity and on sustainable communities both human and wild.

As Berry suggests, the ideologies and practices of science-informed nature management interact with the moral climate of the consumer society in that they are meant to deliver the good of the land, independently of the culture of their communities or the ecology of their economy (Taylor 1989: 232). Neither wilderness preservation nor silviculture truly conserves because these practices neglect the relationship of biodiversity and human cultures. Societies cannot truly conserve nature absent of moral practices and communities in which individuals are directed towards love of goodness, beauty, and truth, which are part of the constitution of the divine creation and not just human constructs and sentiments. The capacity of humans to dwell in the land without excessive instrumentalization arises from their ability to see the species with whom they share the land as divinely made, and hence as fellow creatures and not as so-called natural resources. Seeing the world as God’s creation involves seeing it as gift rather than a possession; it also involves recognizing that there are limits to nature’s bounty (DeWitt 1998). The ability to receive gifts and to perceive limits are moral qualities that are eroded by the heedless greed and sloth encouraged by a machine-dominated consumer economy.

In his account of the intrinsic relation between human virtue and ecological richness, between good work and the health of the land, Berry sets an agrarian ideal against the pernicious partnership of the state, the
Diversity and Dominion

scientist, and the corporation as they exploit the prairie and the forest to destruction. Against those who would suggest that his is a utopian vision that could never provide sufficient food for the 280 million who now live in America, Berry points to the farms of the Amish who have managed to farm the prairie in such a way as to preserve the soil while also being productive and successful farmers. The secret of their success is that they understand that there is a relationship between good farming and good politics, between cultivating the soil and nurturing human character. The Amish resist the institutional forms and technologies that the nation-state advances in its control of nature. For Berry, as for the Amish, this control represents an idolatrous subjection of the earth and its creatures to human design, and hence the unsettling of America ultimately manifests a spiritual and moral malaise. The core motive of idolatry is the desire to manipulate the human relation to the divine through the construction and control of natural objects. As Charles Taylor suggests, the desire to reduce nature to human control is analogous to a desire to control the human relation to God:

The instrumental stance towards the world has been given a new and important spiritual meaning. It is not only the stance which allows us to experiment and thus obtain valid scientific results. It is not only the stance which gives us rational control over ourselves and our world. In this religious tradition, it is the way we serve God in creation . . . Instrumentalizing things is the spiritually essential step. (1989: 232)

Against instrumentality, Berry, like the Amish, sets the recognition of the co-creaturehood of human and non-human; it is in the nature of creatures that they are not all-powerful or all-seeing, but rather dependent on the ecological contingencies the Creator has set into the creation. Modern agronomists and modern foresters in their love of the monocrop and weed-killer set themselves on a constant treadmill of interventions designed to eradicate contingency, to supplant ecological food webs and traditional husbandry with flow charts, factory farms, and bankable utilities. Like the utilitarianism of the monocropper, the preservationist

3. Karl Barth has much to say about the contingency of creatures: "The creature is not self-existent. It has not assumed its nature and existence of itself or given it to itself. It did not come into being by itself. It does not consist by itself. It cannot sustain itself. It has to thank its creation and therefore its Creator for the fact that it came into being and is and will be" (2003: 94).
Van Houtan and Northcott: Nature and the Nation-state

mindset also involves conquest and control, even seen in the advocacy by some conservation scientists of the need to exclude indigenous peoples from tropical forest preserves (e.g., Terborgh 1999, Karanth 2007). The assumption is that conservation is monoculturally related to the mindset of the conservation scientist just as the modern forester rejects the apparent inefficiency of the diverse natural forest for the quantifiable purity of the monocrop plantation (Scott 1999). Neither approach has ultimately proven effective in resisting the widespread depredation of nature (Van Houtan 2006). And for Berry the reason is clear: in its specialization of function and the dedication of its various functionaries—agronomists, conservationists, consumers, farmers, food manufacturers, foresters, politicians—to goals and procedures that are disparate from one another, modern America reproduces in its social structures the deeper alienation between modern human work and the good of the land.

The consequent ecocide is not directly intended by the individuals who find their careers in these agencies. Instead it appears an instance of what Hannah Arendt identified as the “banality of evil” in her dispatches from the trial of the Gestapo officer Adolf Eichmann. Though he had organized the transportation of so many Jews to the death camps, Arendt did not find Eichmann to be sociopathic, or even display a malign personality. Rather, Eichmann was a bureaucrat who lacked the imagination to do anything other than follow the orders of Hitler and Himmler. Like genocide, ecocide is a consequence of chains of command and bureaucratic and economic procedures too long and complex for their consequences to be fully understood or mastered by any one of those who assent to the collective will. Instead we encounter in these imperial forms of command and control what liberation theologians call structural sin, or what Saint Paul called the “principalities and powers.” The individual caught in these structures may not be a vicious or violent person, but in colluding with them, she assents to their forceful domination of the natural world.

John Steinbeck understands something profound in the complex social reality of sin in his novel The Grapes of Wrath. Through the story of the Joad family’s attempt to cope with the Dust Bowl tragedy, Steinbeck presents an account of human suffering and the wasting of the land that is at once political and ecological, personal and social. Unlike so many moderns, Steinbeck seems to recognize the profundity of human evil. Contemporary conservationists and environmental philosophers, like most modern scientists and philosophers, refuse the central place given to
Diversity and Dominion

sin and evil in the Jewish and Christian traditions as part of the theological worldview overturned by the Enlightenment (McFadyen 2000). The lack of a robust conception of sin and evil in modern nature philosophies is indicated in the widely shared assumption that reason and law can redeem the human-nature relationship from the overbearing dominion of modern industrial civilization. But with the recent attack of the Bush Junior administration on ecological regulations and its subversion of the effectiveness of the Environmental Protection Agency, this assumption looks increasingly misguided. Under the Bush administration nature preservation has become hotly contested terrain and “Uncle Sam” looks less like the savior of nature envisaged by John Muir than its rapacious destroyer. From the high point of the 1970s when major pieces of legislation such as the Clean Water Act and Clean Air Act were put in place, and the Environmental Protection Agency was created, the debate now in America has returned to the earlier more colonial emphasis on property rights. We are now seeing increasing prioritization of the economic rights of corporations and large individual landowners over the well-being of ecological and human communities of place.

BIBLICAL DOMINION VERSUS DOMINATION

Perhaps the most surprising feature of this new assertion of human dominion over nature is not only that it comes at a time of unprecedented ecological threat, in the form of global warming, but that it has attracted considerable support among millions of American Christians who, while conservative on matters of personal morality, are willing to embrace an economic creed that is revolutionary in its deracinating effects on rural and urban communities alike as both jobs and natural resources are culled in the pursuit of profit margins. And yet conservative Christians who place property rights before the rights of nature believe that they themselves are the ones pursuing a biblical mandate that sets humans in dominion over the earth.

This conception of dominion is, however, at odds with the core meanings of the Hebrew word radah, often translated as dominion. Radah carries a double meaning of both ascent and descent. In the context of the passage, and in the larger narrative of the Old Testament, the clear meaning is that when humans live righteously and humbly and justly on earth, they enjoy the fruits of the land and so they ascend in their likeness to and
relation with the Creator. Conversely, when humans assert themselves forcefully and pridefully, neglecting the laws of the Creator that are set into the creation, they descend from their place of dominion and the likeness of the Creator is marred. As such, in their wickedness they subject the land to unjust burdens and so they loose their place in the land while the land loses its fertility. We already see this moral cosmology displayed in the story of the fall of Adam and Eve and their resulting exclusion from the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve misappropriate the fruits of the garden, and this misappropriation leads to their expulsion to occupy a land where they must endure sweat and toil, fighting thorns and briars for sustenance (Hiebert 1996). Once true dominion is lost, and humanity falls, the land too is subject to futility. And from the second chapter of Genesis through the rest of the Old Testament, there is no point at which humans are said to regain just radah, true dominion, over the earth. The word dominion only recurs in the sense of descent; as an adjective used to describe the exploitative and oppressive rule of kings and emperors whose forms of rule stand opposed to the righteousness and justice of Yahweh, and seen in the Mosaic covenant. In the story of the fall and its playing out in the subsequent history of Israel, the original dominion offered by God to Adam is lost and never regained.

In the New Testament, the hues of radah find reference in the gospel accounts of Christ's temptation in the wilderness, where St. Mark records, “he was with the wild animals.” The implication is that his Lordship of the earth is such that it is acknowledged by non-human creatures even though refused by humans whose minds are darkened by the inheritance of the Fall. The Lucan account of Christ's birth offers an interesting juxtaposition in this respect, displaying the birth of the Incarnate One in an animal stall among lowing creatures who need no revelation to recognize the Lord of the cosmos, an implication that is extensively drawn out in medieval depictions of the birth of Christ. The same artistic tradition depicts the adulation of foreign kings who, unlike the murderous Herod, submit their dominion to the cosmic rule of the Incarnate child. The implication, as in the Magnificat of Mary, is that the high are brought low on bended knee while the lowly—the animals and those who tend them—are exalted by the birth of the King amongst them. This theme is taken up in the earliest tradition of Christian art as Susan Power Bratton displays in chapter 6 in the present volume.
Diversity and Dominion

The American Christian account of dominion suffers from the same deficiencies we identify in the American accounts of nature conservation as seen in Muir and Pinchot. This is the recognition that no earthly form of sovereignty or dominion can escape the infection of sin and the Fall between the Resurrection and the eschaton. The confidence of conservative Christians in the rule of the corporation and the citizen consumer, and the lack of awareness of the ambiguities of any form of dominion other than that of Christ is a lacunae that is sharply at odds with the political theologies that informed the founding fathers of America. The Calvinist and covenantal theology that guided their deliberations played an important role in the creation of a three-fold separation of powers, and a further division of powers between federal and state governments, precisely because they understood the continuing infection of sin in human affairs and therefore believed that the only adequate restraint on the dominion of any branch of human government was the division of political power into multiple entities (e.g., Eleazar 1984).

THE MICROPOLITICS OF JOHN HOWARD YODER

The themes of dominion, politics, and sin that are missing in the conservation dialogue, and in the political theology of the Christian right, play a central role in the writing of the American Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder. Yoder describes human history as if there are not one, but two, great falls. The first is in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve, involving their prideful assertion of the human creature over the will of the Creator. The second fall is the fall of the church, which occurs after the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine to Christianity. This second fall, in which Constantine sanctions the Christian God as one of the pantheon of gods recognized as legitimate by Rome. The eventual consequence was an emergent rupture between the anti-imperial, and less hierarchical, ethic of the first Christians and the ethics and politics of a more imperial Christianity in subsequent centuries. In both falls the biblical mandate of human dominion is radically compromised.

Against the politics of empire, and the partnership between church and state that this politics births, Yoder sets his account of the body politics of Christians. He suggests that the social forms of the Christian moral life after the death and resurrection of Christ involves a limited recovery by Christians of the God-given capacity to exercise divine authority on
Earth. In particular Yoder reads the words of Christ to the disciples “what you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven” as giving the church a “transcendent moral ratification” (Yoder 1984: 27) for decisions the church makes concerning the righting of wrongs, or practical moral reasoning. This location of moral authority in the practice of binding and loosing, or making judgments, is of foundational importance for Yoder’s classically Anabaptist identification of the life of the church with the micropolitics of the local congregation. Yoder sets this account of practical moral reasoning against both “individualistic intuitionism” and rule-based accounts of moral reasoning. This means for Yoder that the micropolitics of local place-based moral communities are central to the Christian social ethic. This also reflects the central and guiding insight of the radical reformers from which the American Mennonites descended “who refuse to delegate ‘being church’ to the civil powers” (1984: 28). For Yoder then, there can be no contiguity between Christian dominion understood as the authority to bind and loose and the rule of the nation-state. On the contrary, the church is called constantly to witness to the moral ambiguity of all forms of community, corporation, institution, and state, as all run the risk of supplanting consensual conversation with coercive violence.

This account means that moral reasoning always involves a community process. And it is moreover a process that is “not reducible to a political science model projecting who promotes what interests, with how much power, through which procedures” (1984: 35). By contrast for Muir, moral authority and the battle to save nature are located in the individual’s transcendent experience of the sublime and the sentiments it evokes, and for Pinchot, moral authority resides in the eminent domain of the nation-state to determine the greater good or the utility of the land. But as Yoder puts it in *The Christian Witness to the State*:

> The actual socialization of certain elements in the economy may be dictated by certain considerations of justice, efficiency, risk, or public welfare—Tennessee Valley Authority, national parks, public schools, roads, post office, public health, etc.—where competition or unsupervised private management would be harmful to the general welfare; but socialism as a panacea and centralized planning as the major economic development are open to challenge both theologically and practically. (1964: 58)

In this way Yoder’s moral theories resonate powerfully with Wendell Berry’s ecological essays. Like Yoder, Berry understands the need for vigi-
Diversity and Dominion

lance to prevent any rule, procedure, or institution from turning into a form of prideful or idolatrous dominion. However, Yoder gives a clearer account than Berry for why this vision is necessary, and this is located in the fact that the only creature who legitimately exercises dominion after the Genesis fall is crucified on a cross. As he says, “only from within the community of resurrection... is the cruciformity of the cosmos a key rather than a scandal” (1984: 36). For Yoder then, there is no guarantee that even Christians will not fall back into a false prideful dominion, other than their continual commitment to confess and practice what he calls the “cruciformity of the cosmos.”

Although Yoder is theologically conservative, he is not a right-wing Christian, because he believes the limited role of the nation-state to involve the preservation of the fabric of the society and the cosmos from unrestrained power either of an economic or a political kind (1964: 5). Like Berry, Yoder also challenges the idea that it is possible to construct a moral society or to institutionalize a set of procedures without citizens themselves practicing morality in their micropolitics. As he puts it, “practical moral reasoning if Christian must always be expected to be at some point subversive” (1984: 40). The logic of universal moral reasoning is analogous to the logic of nation-state as empire. Both involve a coercive claim to subject human communities and relationships to procedures and rules that eschew the local particular and place-based character of being. The central significance of the cross for Yoder, as for Paul, is that Jesus Christ crucified makes captivity captive and dethrones the principalities and powers that usurp God’s sovereignty in the world. This is why for Yoder the only way in which Christians rule legitimately is through confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation, and not through coercion, rules, and violence.

In the perspective of the agrarian ethic of Berry and the body politics of Yoder, the violence of the American nation-state against native peoples, non-human animals, and plants, as well as the use of eminent domain against its own citizens, is crucially related to the millennialist claim that America is the biblical “New World,” the new creation, and even the guarantor of the happiness of its own people (Northcott 2004). Muir’s idea that Uncle Sam will defend nature from fools and industrialists generates a national park system that transforms nature into a symbolic spectacle, a source of entertainment and diversion and of national identity and pride in flag and empire. It then becomes acceptable to tarmac over land near
Old Faithful so that so people can come as spectators of a geyser. It likewise becomes acceptable that large RV parks are built within national parks to accommodate thousands of Americans who will not abandon a machine-dependent and electronically distracted consumer life style even to visit wilderness. Perhaps this is most obvious at Mount Rushmore National Memorial. Here, the first President Bush remarked that the Black Hills of the Dakotas, once dynamited and reshaped to the visages of American presidents, is a “communion with the very soul of America” (Bush 1991).

For Anthony Giddens, the roots of the structural violence of the modern nation-state lie in its increasing monopolization of sovereign power over the bodies of its citizens and the land they inhabit and its redistribution of that power among its principal agencies and partners (1987). Yoder argues that the state is a necessary locus of sovereignty for there must always be powers that stand in the place of God in human society; but in the world before the eschaton these powers are fallen and hence sinful. Christian witness to the state therefore always involves an insistence on the submission of the state to its divine mandate, which is to restrain evil, to conserve, and to preserve the fabric of human society. And such fabric we suggest, though Yoder does not, includes local communities and their natural context—all creatures. In this perspective, the central problem with the National Forests and the National Parks is that they are both national, possessive objects of the nation-state and beholden to its desires, its military, and its economic corporations.

This perspective can also help to explain why the Amish are such good conservers of the soil. In their efforts to resist the concentrated material power that mechanical devices such as tractors and trucks put in the hands of individual farmers, the Amish express in their farming techniques the implications of their cruciform micropolitics; hegemonic power of the kind the machine and the technologically advanced nation-state acquire over humans and nature is at odds with the virtues of humility, fidelity, and truthfulness that make possible the mutual subordination of the Amish one to another in their agrarian communities.

For Jerome, holiness comes through the cross of Christ and redemption comes through that wounded body, when all cosmic forces are subdued by the humility of the Son of God. For Christians space and time are remade during the hours between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. In the light of this remaking, dominion is restored to the creation but it is not the triumphant dominion of the Emperor but the victory of the
Diversity and Dominion

Lamb of God. That victory is not possible without the wounds of the cross. Conserving the memory of the cross and its implications for the sovereignty of all human institutions and powers enables Christians to practice the kinds of holiness that make it possible to create and sustain human communities that do not destroy but conserve the new creation that is first glimpsed in the resurrected body of Christ.
REFERENCES


