



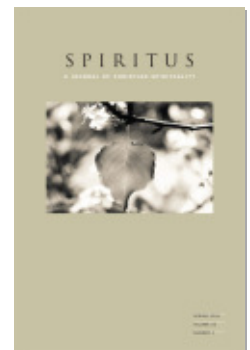
PROJECT MUSE®

Devoted to Nature: The Religious Roots of American Environmentalism by Evan Berry (review)

J.W. Pritchett

Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality, Volume 16, Number 1, Spring 2016, pp. 126-128 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/scs.2016.0003>



➔ *For additional information about this article*
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/615277>

Devoted to Nature: The Religious Roots of American Environmentalism. By Evan Berry. Oakland: University of California Press, 2015. 272 pp. \$29.95.

Environmentalism and Christianity have a complicated relationship. On the one hand, conventional environmental history accepts the assertions of Lynn White's seminal essay "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis," characterizing environmentalism as a radical departure from prior Christian anthropocentrism. Alternatively, Christian environmental writers, such as Loren Wilkinson, often argue that environmentalism is the fulfillment of a proper Christian theology and ethic of creation care. Evan Berry steps into the fray of this debate with his *Devoted to Nature: The Religious Roots of American Environmentalism*. His central assertion is that American environmentalism is the product of a "historically demonstrable genealogical affinity with Christian theological tradition" (2). Yet, while Berry maps environmentalism's development onto a Christian spiritual and soteriological landscape, the theological content of progressive era spirituality is presented as a significant diversion from traditional currents of orthodoxy even as it maintains certain Christian commitments and language. In order to demonstrate the theological underpinnings of early twentieth century environmental groups, Berry focuses his analysis and documentation on the confluence of spiritual practices and recreational practices in environmental groups of the 1920s and 30s.

Berry's first chapter maps the theological development of recreation as a soteriological practice via the development of romanticism, nominalism, and Muscular Christianity. In his narration, Romanticism names sin as the alienation of civilization from nature, nominalism created a world in which nature could be as theologically instructive as scripture, and Muscular Christianity cultivated an understanding of Christian spiritual practice devoted to masculine vitality, sport, and embodied virtue. Berry uses the practice of walking to illustrate how these intellectual and cultural forces combined to promote recreation in nature as a method of receiving grace whereby "the salvific possibilities opened by the idea that God's grace was to be actively pursued in the natural world ushered in a new era of outdoor enthusiasm" (59).

Berry's second chapter looks at specific motivations for the emergence of progressive era organizations, which would come to spearhead political environmentalism. These organizations, such as the Sierra Club, the Wilderness Society, and the Mountaineers were not simply secular political organizations but rather "emerged from a synthesis of religious ideas and scientific knowledge" (61). Realizing that industrialism was destroying spiritually significant natural spaces, these groups organized to protect aesthetic natural amenities as resources for the spiritual well-being of future generations. At the heart of this political motivation is the conviction that natural spaces have spiritual, moral, and soteriological value.

In his third chapter, Berry, details the dependence of outdoor recreation's popularity on religious nature writing, arguing that rather than being a radical departure from a medieval view of forests and mountains as terrifying, the progressive era environmentalists tapped into longstanding Hebrew and Christian "emphasis on mountains as key sites of spiritual transformation" (112). Berry finds Dante as more characteristic of Christian spiritual emphasis: The Divine Comedy's "mountains may be fearsome, signifying the impossibility of unaided ascent, yet they are the primary metaphor for a topography of redemption" (112–113). Berry outlines

the emergence of mountain-climbing literature through the nineteenth century as “the primary carriers of what might be called romantic soteriology, the widespread view that direct experiences of the natural world are of moral and spiritual benefit to individuals” (118). This nineteenth-century insight was adopted by twentieth-century conservation organizations as the religious justification for the protection of wild landscapes. Along with mountaineering, backpacking, walking, and birding, romantic soteriology was attached to that particularly American tradition—the road trip—which also drew from the resources of pilgrimage spirituality to establish a practice of travel to sites of natural spiritual significance and personal moral restoration.

In his final chapter, Berry argues that the whole discourse assumed a nominally Christian ethic. With this assertion, he differs with interpreters who find the spiritual content of early environmental writing to be either empty rhetorical flourish or, alternatively, animistic and neo-pagan. Using the evidence of personal narrative essays common to club journals such as *The Mountaineer* and *The Sierra Club Bulletin* Berry maps the contours of Christian thinking that made the narratives of spiritual experience intelligible in the progressive era, even as it incorporated more pantheist and animist leanings. He finds that the progressive era writings maintained a communal focus and a forward-looking optimism absent from the romantic writings of the nineteenth century that were more characteristically individualistic and nostalgic. Perhaps most importantly, Berry finds the preservationists grounding their ethics on a “primordial simplicity of human nature” as the “source of ethical purpose” rather than referencing “historical revelation.” Thus, he concludes that “recreationists lived according to Rousseau’s view that human nature is fundamentally good and that the fall from grace is tied not to individual souls but to the hubris of civilization (166–167).

Berry offers much to ponder. He documents a moment in Christian spirituality where the “intrinsic value of wilderness” was found in the “moral salubriousness of time in the outdoors,” and where the outdoors offered an “appropriate cure for modern alienation” (172 and 157). These spiritual findings would be at home in any number of contemporary treatments of eco-theology or spiritual ecology. However, Berry also documents a spiritual practice that cuts against the grain of Christian tradition. He finds the recreationist willing to jettison a personal and active God, abandon original sin, and embrace an eschaton achievable by human effort. All of these are the practical outcomes of an ontology that flirts with—and may even fully embrace—pantheism.

Theologians may find Berry’s narration of the realist/nominalist turn ripe for critique. For instance, many contemporary Christian thinkers would maintain that nominalism is not the theological foundation of an environmental concern, but rather it is precisely a re-appropriation of medieval realism that is required to overcome our modern anthropocentrism. Historians, likewise, may wish to contend that the prevalence of Christian imagery and language is evidence of a latent cultural Christendom rather than a personal Christian commitment. Finally, Christian thinkers of all disciplines may wish to debate the extent to which the pantheism, Pelagianism, or deism evident in Berry’s sources constitute an orthodox Christian position.

But, for those of us working at the intersections of Christian spirituality, Theology, and environmental concern Berry’s book is an essential read. Not only

does it have impressive documentation and historical analysis of a critical moment in our recent spiritual history, but it should also inspire in us a critical questioning of our own work. To what extent does our commitment to spiritual practice out in creation depend upon transcendentalist, Romantic, or some other heterodox commitment? And if so, what is at stake in that commitment? Have we forgotten the scriptural witness of wilderness as struggle, temptation, and death in the wake of John Muir's eloquence? Do we read the transfiguration as complete with the confidence of an anthropocentric salvation from our ecological self-destruction? These sorts of reflective questions should not be received as threatening but rather should help us to separate the wheat from the Chaff in the search for the truth to which we witness. This book, while not without its flaws, can help us ask good questions of our own work as we continue to articulate a concern for creation that remains robustly orthodox in its Christian spirituality and theology.

Devoted to Nature is an accessible read appropriate to undergraduate, graduate, and professional researchers. It would be at home in any historical, sociological, or theological inquiry into American environmentalism.

J.W. PRITCHETT
University of Aberdeen

Spiritual Companionship: A Guide to Protestant Theology and Practice. By Angela H. Reed, Richard R. Osmer, and Marcus G. Smucker. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015. 186 pp. \$21.99.

A joint effort by three praxis scholars representing the Baptist, Presbyterian, and Mennonite traditions has occasioned a valuable new resource focused on Protestant spirituality. This work should find its way to the syllabi in practical theology classes in Protestant seminaries as well as to the libraries of pastors and Protestant churches where a deep commitment to spiritually enriched leadership exists. It embraces the concerns of spirituality scholars who, in the words of Anton Boisen, study "living human documents." By shifting the focus from spiritual direction to spiritual companionship, while continuing to draw upon the insights of classics in the field, the authors have provided an approach to spiritual life, which is focused not simply on individuals but also on small groups and congregations.

This shift, though not dramatic, addresses a number of issues. Over the past three decades significant numbers of Protestant clergy and laity have been trained as spiritual directors through highly respected programs at Roman Catholic retreat houses or in other ecumenical training centers. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many who train as spiritual directors never go on to provide direction to others. Hence, one can hypothesize that they have sought this training to increase their understanding of spirituality and to deepen their personal prayer life. Spiritual companionship offers an alternative way to provide practitioners with background and training in spirituality, is less formal than traditional one-on-one spiritual direction, and has as its focus the wider life of the congregation. This book offers clergy and laity with the gifts for spiritual companionship a number of avenues for this ministry.