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Citation

Powell, Russell. "Political Paradox and Religion The Case of the National Parks". Research Reflections Series. Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard Divinity School, 2024. © License: CC-BY-NC.

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Political Paradox and Religion: The Case of the National Parks

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Published: December, 2024

The following Research Reflection is part of CSWR's ongoing series spotlighting the academic study of religions.

The assumption in secular societies like the United States is that religion has no stake in democratic systems of governance. Giving attention to religion's place in politics, however, can help us to account for the paradoxes we see emerge in democratic life. This is especially the case in the politics of environmentalism, long assumed to be a province of the secular.

Democracy is rife with paradox. Take as an example how citizens' direct participation in politics is crucial to democracy's success. Yet, also consider how the impact of any one person's vote is usually negligible. There's also the paradox of power. To achieve security, democratic government infringes on individual freedoms. Yet power is best maintained when leadership cedes some of it.

Another paradox with which democratic citizens are well-acquainted is that freedom is derived through constraint. While laws restrict citizens' actions, those very restrictions allow citizens to pursue what they wish more freely—the “liberal paradox.” Liberalism's early advocates like Locke, Rousseau, and Mill treated this paradox as fundamental to democratic polity, as have more recent political theorists like John Rawls, Judith Shklar, and Amartya Sen.

This same liberal paradox emerges consequentially in the history of American environmentalism. The freedom many Americans celebrate in the national parks is predicated upon it, in fact. That's because the celebration of wilderness as a site of personal freedom stands in direct conflict with the realization that the freedom to exploit nature necessarily leads to its ruin. Freedom needs boundaries to preserve the very spaces in which it's assumed to thrive. To visit Yosemite, Yellowstone, or Acadia National Park is paradoxically to visit some of the most restrictive places in the United States. (This is saying nothing of the fact that Native communities were displaced to create such “wilderness” sites in the first place.)

What does religion have to do with the emergence of a paradox like this?

Political paradoxes can appear when conflicts between competing religious traditions prove irreconcilable. Such conflicts produce the sort of paradox we see operating in the idea of the national parks—America's “*best idea*,” as the writer Wallace Stegner famously said.

Of all the things religion is, foremost among them is an appeal to an ultimate source of authority whose standard of accuracy is believed to justify one's thoughts and actions. That standard, should it hold, then serves as a warrant for one's faithfulness. In a liberal society like the United States, paradoxes appear when different religious traditions advance disparate answers to the question of whether and how religion is made answerable to public demands for justification.

For example, consider the conflict between two religious traditions, Augustinianism and Emersonianism, which play significant parts in the history of American environmentalism. Their conflict is over accountability. Augustinian Christians, on the one hand, maintain that a Triune God authorizes the distinctions between right and wrong belief and good and bad action. The Church, God's earthly authority, administers those distinctions to the faithful while chastening human sin.

Emersonians, on the other hand, see the individual, not God or an ecclesial hierarchy, as the sole locus of genuine authority. They resist at every turn Augustinians' suggestion that any person must answer to some authority they themselves did not derive.

John Muir (1836-1914), whose writings played an outsize role in founding the national parks, was shaped by both these traditions. As a child of an overbearing Christian evangelist, Muir was taught that "quenching every spark of pride and self-confidence was a sacred duty." Yet when Muir went away to college and came under the influence of Emerson's essays, Muir's belief in nature's power as a source of spiritual renewal took root, compelling his activism to preserve American wilderness in the national parks.

All political paradoxes aren't reducible to irreconcilable beliefs between religious traditions. Yet in Muir's case, a weariness of humans' ingrained iniquity (a mark of his Augustinian commitments) combined with the belief that the freedom accessible in nature restores the clarity of moral vision (a mark of Muir's Emersonianism) helps to explain why the national parks are such paradoxical places as they are. The requirement of a robust state apparatus to sanctify and protect the national parks has, for as long as environmental awareness has held space in American politics, been coupled with the paradoxical need to visit the Parks to find freedom from state influence.

While political movements like American environmentalism may not strike us as traditionally religious, a figure like Muir demonstrates that politics can indeed be shaped by the logic of religious tradition. Although the liberal tradition that gave birth to modern democracy proscribes religion from public forms of debate (and for good reason—theocracy is antithetical to the freedoms liberalism promotes), understanding religion's persistent role in public life is vital to navigating the paradoxes that underpin it.

Suggested Citation:

Powell, Russell. "Political Paradox and Religion: The Case of the National Parks". *Research Reflections Series*. Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard Divinity School, 2025. ©License: CC BY NC.

Bio: Russell Powell's research is on the religious, ethical, and political resonances of contemporary environmental issues, particularly the religious dimension of American environmental thought. Prior to joining the CSWR he taught at Boston College as a Core Fellow and Visiting Assistant Professor of Environmental Theology and Ethics. Russell earned his doctorate in the multidisciplinary Religion and Society program at Princeton Theological Seminary in 2019. He has held teaching positions at the College of the Holy Cross, Amherst College, and Princeton University. Russell is currently completing a book manuscript focused on John Muir, the famed nineteenth-century conservationist and founder of the Sierra Club, and Muir's influence (for good and ill) on conceptions of the sacred in modern American environmental thought. Russell's research also examines the intersection of race, religion, and environment. With Rebecca Kneale Gould, he was an editor of a two-volume special issue of the *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture* that reappraised various cornerstone American environmental thinkers in light of contemporary justice concerns over race, gender, and class.