Religion and Resistance in Appalachia: Localized Narratives and the Fight against Mountaintop Removal

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Abstract

In this paper I consider forms of Appalachian mountain religion as contextualized narratives, utilized by locals in resistance to the practice of mountaintop removal coal mining. Mountaintop removal, a large-scale form of surface contour mining, entails accessing coal deposits by removing the covering earth and dumping it into nearby valleys. Along with obvious aesthetic issues, critics of mountaintop removal cite biodiversity loss, flooding and erosion due to deforestation, groundwater pollution, and social and economic damages as the major problems associated with the practice. Importantly, many of those who resist mountaintop removal operate from deeply religious groundings. I argue that attending to localized religious discourse regarding environmental preservation lends important insights into the further study of the "greening of religions" and theories of the narrative base for environmental ethics, including those proposed by MacIntyre, Gare, Lakoff, and Johnson, among others. Resistors to mountaintop removal actively construct new narratives based in religions in response to the practice. Appalachian mountain religion forms a narrative of dissent against the environmentally extractive dominant culture. I conclude that the example of Appalachia is evidence for the power of contextualized religious or spiritual narratives in developing and sustaining community responses to environmental problems.

Introduction

Mountaintop removal is an intensive coal mining practice causing great ecological and social damages, including water pollution, flooding, air pollution, loss of biodiversity, job loss, property damage, and numerous community health problems such as respiratory ailments. While similar forms of strip-mining and open pit mining occur around the world, the practice of mountaintop removal, or "surface contour mining," is most associated with the coalfields of Central Appalachia (including parts of Virginia, West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Ohio). Along with its vast deposits of coal, Appalachia is known for its unique culture and particular, indigenous forms of religious expression, or "mountain religion," including many small, non-denominational family churches inspired by Holiness and evangelical movements. Appalachian mountain religion is intimately tied to cultural patterns of the region, and it often maintains a strong thread of resistance to outside influences.

In recent years, Appalachian residents have begun to speak out against mountaintop removal and the broader energy-dependent American culture seen as the cause of the practice. Many of these local activists utilize religious language in explaining and defending their resistance. For these activists, Appalachian mountain religion serves as a powerful, localized narrative of resistance against economic and ecological destruction.[1] While much work on the relationships between religious values and environmental practices has already been done, four different but related theoretical streams, generally unacknowledged in early work on religions and ecology, help consider these connections further. These theoretical streams are as follows: Arran Gare's work on narratives and environmental ethics, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's work on the metaphorical base of human cognition, Jim Cheney and Anthony Weston's work on localized narratives, and Robert Orsi's theory of lived religion. Utilizing elements of these theories reveals how Appalachian mountain religion works as a localized narrative of resistance and adds to the already rich discussion on the relationships between religious values and environmental practices.

This paper moves through four sections. The first is a historical overview of Appalachian culture and religion along with a history of mountaintop removal and grassroots action against it. The second section examines briefly the state of the study of religions and environmental behaviors, focusing primarily on the Forum on Religion and Ecology and the work of J. Baird Callicott and Max Oelschlaeger. The third section

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[1] It is important to note that not all Appalachian residents belong to one of the many small denominations that make up mountain religion. Though they do often overlap, "evangelicalism" and "mountain religion" are not exactly the same either. Many of the religious activists against mountaintop removal, as well, are not members of mountain denominations. I do not mean to ignore the contributions of others involved in the fight against mountaintop removal, but to look more closely at one specific example of religious resistance.

explores more deeply the four theoretical streams listed above, elevating the elements of each that are particularly helpful in considering religions and nature. The final section utilizes elements from the four theoretical streams discussed, arguing that Appalachian mountain religion serves as a localized narrative of resistance and suggesting that scholars should examine more closely the power of smaller scale narratives in producing large scale social and environmental changes.

Religion, Nature, and Culture in Appalachia

Looking westward from the British colonies before the American Revolution, Appalachia was a formidable boundary to the mysterious territories beyond. White hunters and trappers like Daniel Boone traveled the area in the early and middle 18th century, but the toughness of the terrain and recurring conflicts with Indian tribes such as the Cherokee kept all but the most determined settlers away. Following the Revolutionary War, Americans looked in greater numbers to the less populated lands beyond the western mountains. Soil depletion in the coastal and piedmont South, combined with increasing population, necessitated this westward migration. By the late 1700s, enough settlers had crossed the Blue Ridge Mountains to form the states of Tennessee and Kentucky, forcing the Cherokee and other native groups onto reserves of decreasing size until their removal to the Oklahoma Indian Territory in 1838.[2] While many settlers crossed the mountains into the western farmlands of Tennessee, Kentucky, and beyond, relatively few stayed in the mountainous regions. Southern and central Appalachia remained sparsely populated.

[2] Donald Edward Davis, *Where There are Mountains: An Environmental History of the Southern Appalachians* (University of Georgia Press: Athens, 2000); John Alexander Williams, *Appalachia: A History* (University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, 2002).

Coal was discovered along the Ohio River in the mid-1700s, spurring the rise of the mining industry in Pennsylvania and western Virginia (not to be the state of West Virginia until 1863). While mining in the Pennsylvania area fueled the Industrial Revolution, the chief resource of southern Appalachia remained its vast stands of old-growth hardwood forest. This era also witnessed the formation of uniquely Appalachian culture. Census data and other records show that most of the migrants to the west were of English heritage, contrary to popular perceptions of the Appalachian highlanders, but the Scottish, Irish, and Scotch-Irish immigrants brought their traditional systems of land tenure and contributed to the distinctive Appalachian culture.[3] These immigrants from the British Isles, coming from a land long denuded of its forests, did not have knowledge of sustainable forestry practices and contributed to the rapid deforestation of the region.[4]

With westward migration came increased access to land and resources and a growing sense of freedom from the east-coast seats of authority. This increasing independence was also represented in religious developments, particularly in the rise of evangelicalism and later in forms of Appalachian mountain religion. Histories of evangelicalism in North America generally begin with the First Great Awakening, starting in 1734 in Northampton, Massachusetts. At the time, Northampton, located in the Connecticut River Valley, was near the westward limit of Anglo-American settlement. Away from the surveillance of theological authority in Boston, the churchgoers of Northampton, led by the young preacher Jonathan Edwards, emphasized

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[3] Davis, pp. 97-102. The term Scotch-Irish does not refer to a short-hand conflation of Scottish and Irish cultures, but to a specific group from Northern Ireland and the border country between Scotland and England. See Grady McWhiney, *Cracker Culture: Celtic Ways in the Old South* (University of Alabama Press: Tuscaloosa, 1989) and David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2001).

[4] Barbara Freese, *Coal: A Human History* (Penguin Books: New York, 2003); Harry M. Caudill, *Night Comes to the Cumberlands: A Biography of a Depressed Area* (Jesse Stuart Foundation: Ashland, KY, 2001 [1963]); Davis 2000; Williams 2002.

the power of faith in Jesus and outward expressions of inward experiences. John Wesley and others led similar populist Christian movements at the same time in the countryside of England and Wales. Like Edwards, Wesley preached about the importance of individual faith and service. This opened the way for his followers to express their religious experiences in ways generally frowned upon by Congregationalist and Anglican authorities in North America.[5]

Wesley also emphasized itinerancy, constantly traveling the English countryside, preaching to the local people, and living from their charity. This style of itinerant preaching translated well in the wild lands of Appalachia, reaching the isolated households in the deepest hollows. The interchange of settlers from rural portions of the British Isles to Appalachia and the south later in the 18th century helped to reinforce what would become the Second Great Awakening. Methodist itinerants in North America like George Whitefield and Lorenzo Dow continued this tradition, emphasizing individual expressions of faith in an increasingly democratized land. As historian Nathan Hatch explains, "the rise of evangelical Christianity in the early republic is, in some measure, a story of the success of common people in shaping the culture after their own priorities rather than the priorities outlined by gentlemen such as the framers of the Constitution."[6] Distancing themselves from traditional theological rigor, early evangelicals were free to blend and incorporate different denominational elements into new formulations. Elements of Calvinism and Arminianism (generally, a rejection of predestination in favor of free will) remained in tension as Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist preachers

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[5] This is basically the argument of Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (Yale University Press: New Haven, CT, 1989). See also Mark A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield and the Wesleys* (Intervarsity Press: Downers Grove, IL, 2003).
[6] Hatch, p. 9.

competed for followers and divided into numerous sub-denominations.[7] Appalachian mountaineers also incorporated folk religious practices and beliefs, such as belief in magic and the use of seasonal almanacs. As religious historians David Hall and Jon Butler argue, these quasi- and non-Christian elements were incorporated into various Christian forms by laypersons through the 18th and 19th centuries.[8]

While the great revivals of the 19th century seemed widespread to east coast church leaders, historians today show that acceptance of evangelicalism in the south was a slow and complicated process. According to Christine Heyrman, evangelicalism remained a northern phenomenon until well after the American Revolution. Only after the retreat of Anglican leaders to England following the Revolution did evangelical preachers gain widespread acceptance among the southern population, competing with secular pleasures like horse racing and fighting that consumed that population's interests.[9] John Sensbach warns against overemphasizing the importance of evangelicalism in the south, saying, "to equate evangelicalism with southern religion is to convey that there was an air of inevitability about the outcome of eighteenth-century religious change and turmoil."[10] These historical points are important to note, but it is still the case that Baptists and Methodists appealed to the subsistence farmers of the south. Though their movements may have swept the south more like a rising tide than a

[7] Loyal Jones, "Mountain Religion: An Overview," in Bill J. Leonard (ed.), *Christianity in Appalachia: Profiles in Regional Pluralism* (University of Tennessee Press: Knoxville, 1999), pp. 91-102; E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 2003), p. 83.
[8] David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 1989); Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 1990).
[9] Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, 1997), pp. 18-19.
[10] John F. Sensbach, "Before the Bible Belt: Indians, Africans, and the New Synthesis of Eighteenth-Century Southern Religious History," in Beth Barton Schweiger and Donald G. Mathews (eds), *Religion in the American South: Protestants and Others in Cultural History* (University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, 2004), pp. 5-29: p. 7.

tidal wave, by the 20th century widespread southern evangelical devotion, including in traditionally poor and secluded Appalachia, could not be denied.[11]

Following the trauma of the Civil War and the growing popularity of liberal theology and Darwin's natural selection, evangelical preachers began to emphasize biblical literalism. Preachers like Dwight Moody maintained ambivalence toward American culture, accepting the democratic impulse but critical of the moral degeneracy of Victorian industrial culture and "united by their fierce opposition to modernist attempts to bring Christianity into line with modern thought."[12] This emphasis upon biblical literalism and increasing interest in millennialism and the prophecies of the Book of Revelation led to the rise of fundamentalism and further revivals of the early 20th century. This same period also witnessed the emerge of the Pentecostal and Holiness movements, which followed evangelical thought in emphasizing personal conversion experiences and Holy Ghost baptism.[13] All of these movements found fertile territory for growth in the isolated regions of Appalachia. Theological individualism combined with strong senses of family and clan connection to compose the explosion of evangelical sub-denominations that comprises Appalachian mountain religion.

Appalachian mountain religion is an overarching term for the numerous small denominations, mostly influenced by early evangelical teachings and later Holiness theology, which emerged in Appalachia. Snake handlers remain a popular though non-representative example of Appalachian mountain religion. According to historian

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[11] Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia: 1740-1790* (University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, 1999 [1983]); Heyrman, 1997.
[12] George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2006), p. 4.
[13] Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 2003).

Deborah Vansau McCauley, mountain religion is defined theologically by a strong connection between believers and God and by continued resistance to broader theological trends. Despite its origins in poor and isolated communities, McCauley warns against assuming mountain religion to be simply a "religion of the poor." Mountain religion is a product of its environment, she argues, but to call it a "religion of the poor" perpetuates certain condescending perspectives toward the region and its people, as if they are too simple to understand contemporary liberal theology.[14] Mountain religion in Appalachia reflects previous social patterns and serves as a tool of resistance to outside influences among local communities.[15]

While revival was striking the people, economic troubles due to declining resources struck as well. Demand for charcoal and lumber increased timbering in the lower Appalachian states after the Civil War. The emergence of chestnut blight in the early 20th century further damaged the small-scale timber industries, forcing residents off of their lands and into cities where work and money were more available. As the environmental historian Donald Davis notes, "with the death of the chestnut, an entire world did die, eliminating cultural practices that had been viable in the southern Appalachians for more than four centuries."[16] Meanwhile, in the central Appalachian coalfields, harsh working and living conditions at mines and company towns led to the

[14] Deborah Vansau McCauley, *Appalachian Mountain Religion: A History* (University of Illinois Press: Urbana, 1995).
[15] Howard Dorgan, *Giving Glory to God in Appalachia: Worship Practices of Six Baptist Subdenominations* (University of Tennessee Press: Knoxville, 1987); David L. Kimbrough, *Taking up Serpents: Snake Handlers of Eastern Kentucky* (University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, 1995); Bill J. Leonard (ed.), *Christianity in Appalachia: Profiles in Regional Pluralism* (University of Tennessee Press: Knoxville, 1999); McCauley 1995.
[16] Davis, p. 198.

rise of unions and associated conflict. Fights and riots involving unionized miners and coal bosses and their security forces grew more frequent in the late 19th century.[17]

By the beginning of the 20th century, declining populations and resource overexploitation had solidified Appalachia as an impoverished, isolated region. As late as 1913, travelers like Horace Kephart noted the spatial and temporal isolation of the area and its people. Kephart travelled from his home in Iowa in search of adventure and an escape from the morally degenerate characteristics of industrial culture. In the Appalachian regions of North Carolina and Tennessee, he found and celebrated the mountaineers' more primitive lifestyle, writing, "the mountain folk still live in the eighteenth century. The progress of mankind from that age to this is no heritage of theirs."[18] In this same work, he noted that Appalachian dwellers were "marked apart from all other folks by dialect, by customs, by character, by self-conscious isolation."[19] Kephart devoted himself to protecting this simpler area in the "back of beyond" from the damages of industrial society.[20] He lobbied in favor of the establishment of the Great Smokey Mountain National Park and devoted himself to other cultural preservation efforts. Kephart was aware that the Appalachia of 1913 had already suffered environmental damages and that the isolation of the population was due in large part to the human-induced decline in resource availability, but he portrayed this as largely a problem of industrial and capitalist influences from the East and Midwest.[21]

Despite the efforts of individuals like Kephart, extractive practices like mining and forestry were easy to sell to locals with the promise of jobs and economic

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[17] Freese 2003.
[18] Horace Kephart, *Our Southern Highlanders* (Outing Publishing Company: New York, 1913), p. 18.
[19] Kephart, p. 16.
[20] Kephart, p. 29.
[21] Kephart, p. 395.

improvements. This condition of poverty and isolation made possible the chain of events which led to the practice of mountaintop removal. Coal mining was already a deeply entrenched industry in the central Appalachian regions of Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Kentucky by the beginning of the 20th century. Following technological developments, traditional deep mining gave way to more mechanized forms, including strip mining. Rather than sending teams of men and children deep into the earth to access coal seams, mining companies found it cheaper and easier to simply dig down to the coal from above. As the technology improved, these surface mining operations grew. By the 1970s, massive earth movers called drag lines did the work of hundreds of miners.

Currently, mountaintop removal occurs mainly in the central Appalachian states of Kentucky, West Virginia, and Tennessee. Using mineral rights purchased decades in the past, surface mining companies take over thousands of acres at a time. Miners dig down from the tops of mountains and hilly terrain with explosives and drag lines. They dump all of the excess rock, called overburden, into the valleys. The environmental impacts of mountaintop removal are extreme. Wastewater and valley fills allow chemicals to seep into groundwater, polluting the main source for drinking water for many Appalachian residents. The deforestation and terrain change caused by mountaintop removal lead to severe floods. Coal dams located in high valleys threaten the communities below. In 1972 a coal dam in Buffalo Creek, West Virginia collapsed, killing 125 people in the valley.[22] Explosions from the mines damage residential structures. Beyond this, the completed surface mines leave thousands of acres barren and

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[22] Shirley Stuart Burns, *Bringing Down the Mountains: The Impact of Mountaintop Removal Surface Coal Mining on Southern West Virginia Communities, 1970-2004* (West Virginia University Press: Morgantown, 2007), p. 42.

flattened. Though mining companies often plant grasses over closed mines, the soils are often too damaged to support regrowth of native species.[23]

Beyond environmental impacts, many critics cite the devastating social and economic effects of mountaintop removal. The highly mechanized process results in a loss of traditional deep mining jobs. To some, such as activist Judy Bonds, mountaintop removal amounts to "cultural genocide" by the coal companies and the other economic interests that threaten traditional Appalachian culture.[24] Bonds's organization, Coal River Mountain Watch, sells a shirt reading "Save the Endangered Hillbilly." For activists such as Bonds and many others, mountaintop removal is as much about environmental justice and cultural preservation as it is about preservation of biodiversity.

From the beginning, mountaintop removal was not without its critics. As early as 1945, the Annual Ohio Pastors Convention passed a resolution condemning surface mining as an affront to God's creation and a threat to communities dependent upon mining jobs and farm land.[25] In 1960, Kentucky legislator Harry Caudill proposed a ban on surface mining to the Kentucky House of Representatives. In a mining-friendly state, the ban found little official support, but it nonetheless represented an early case of political opposition to the practice.[26] Following this defeat, Caudill penned *Night Comes to the Cumberlands,* lamenting the economic and social damages to his native Kentucky caused by extractive industries. Writing 50 years after Kephart, Caudill's work was colored by tragedy rather than romanticism. He wrote movingly about the legacy of coal

[23] Randall, Alan, Orlen Grunewald, Sue Johnson, Richard Ausness, and Angelos Pagoulatos, "Reclaiming Coal Surface Mines in Central Appalachia: A Case Study of the Benefits and Costs," *Land Economics* 54 (4): 1978, pp. 472-489.
[24] Judy Bonds, speech given at Appalachian Studies Association Conference, Marshall University, March 29, 2008. Author's field notes.
[25] Chad Montrie, *To Save the Land and People: A History of Opposition to Surface Coal Mining in Appalachia* (University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, 2003), p. 36.
[26] Montrie, pp. 62-71.

in Appalachia, "coal has always cursed the land in which it lies. When men begin to wrest it from the earth it leaves a legacy of foul streams, hideous slag heaps and polluted air. It peoples this transformed land with blind and crippled men and with widows and orphans. It is an extractive industry which takes all away and restores nothing. It mars but never beautifies. It corrupts but never purifies."[27] Considered a major work in the history of Appalachian environmentalism, *Night Comes to the Cumberlands* revealed to a broader audience the social and environmental impacts of mining and environmental exploitation.

Beginning in the 1960s, grassroots groups formed in opposition to the community damages posed by mountaintop removal and the mining companies. Early groups included the Appalachian Group to Save the Land and People (formed in 1965), Save Our Cumberland Mountains (formed in 1972), and Kentuckians for the Commonwealth (formed in 1981).[28] These early groups focused on exploitation of workers and residents by mining organizations. As the practice of mountaintop removal spread, more grassroots organizations formed. The Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition formed in 1987 and remains an important organization supporting the rights of those harmed by the effects of mountaintop removal, such as flooding and water contamination.[29] The Coal River Mountain Watch formed in West Virginia in 1998. Today, the group works on litigation against activities associated with mountaintop removal, primarily the location of a sludge dam near Marsh Fork Elementary School.[30] Christians for the Mountains

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[27] Caudill, p. x.
[28] Joe Szakos, "Practical Lessons in Community Organizing in Appalachia: What We've Learned at Kentuckians for the Commonwealth," in Stephen L. Fisher (ed.), *Fighting Back in Appalachia: Traditions of Resistance and Change* (Temple University Press: Philadelphia, 1993), pp. 101-121; Montrie 2003.
[29] Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition, www.ohvec.org, 2008.
[30] One of the group's founders, Julia Bonds, won the 2003 Goldman Prize for environmental activism and leadership. See Burns 2007 and Coal River Mountain Watch, www.crmw.net, 2008.

formed in 2005 as an explicitly Christian organization (though it does not exclude non-Christians from its membership).[31]

Other older national organizations like the Sierra Club have also spoken out against mountaintop removal for its environmental and social damages. More radical groups such as Earth First! and Heartwood, with offshoots such as Katuah Earth First! and Mountain Justice Summer, focus much attention on the issue of mountaintop removal as well. In its online announcement for an upcoming meeting in Appalachian Ohio, Earth First! organizers warn participants, "there is a good chance that your great idea—rainwater collection, for instance, or scrapwood shacks—is already in common use as a survival tactic. While here, do not act the fool; do not be arrogant. Comments to the effect that it is sick to live so far from 'wilderness' will not be taken well by locals or by organizers of this event."[32] At least in the case of mountaintop removal, traditionally biocentric organizations like Earth First! are acknowledging the close connections of rural poverty and social justice to ecological health.

The issue of mountaintop removal is very much an issue of environmental justice. Impoverished and disenfranchised communities in Appalachia are forced to bear the ecological and social costs of America's dependence upon coal. From the beginning, though, there have been local critics of mountaintop removal, and these critics continue to operate from specifically Appalachian cultural and religious contexts. Local religious activists reveal the power of religious narratives in structuring resistance to oppressive systems. From its earliest days, individuals have constructed Appalachian mountain religions is resistance to threatening outside influences. Religious resistance to

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[31] Christians for the Mountains, www.christiansforthemountains.org, 2008.
[32] Earth First! Journal, 2008 Round River Rendezvous, www.earthfirstjournal.org, 2008.

mountaintop removal is just another stage in that historical process; however, the threatening influence at hand, ecological devastation and energy overexploitation, impacts areas far beyond Appalachia.

Perspectives from the Scholarly Study of Religions and the Environment

Before exploring various options available for theorizing the relationships between religious values and environmental practices, a brief exploration of the state of the field is in order. Scholars frequently cite the emergence of the modern concern for the place of religious thought in perpetuating environmental degradation with the publication of "The Historical Root of Our Ecologic Crisis" by Lynn White, Jr., a historian of medieval technology.[33] In this short essay, White cited theological elements of Christianity, particularly its teleology and anthropocentrism, as foundational for the overly-extractive environmental practices of Western society. White was unequivocal in his critique of certain Christian doctrines, claiming for example that "Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen."[34] For White, Christian teachings were to blame for the regnant use-value theories of nature in Europe and North America. The solution to these problems was clear, he continued, "we shall continue to have a worsening ecologic crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man."[35]

Through Christianity remained the most central cause of the problem, White argued that contemporary science and technology, with their roots in Christian theologies, could not solve the ecological crisis either. Instead, we must find alternative

[33] White, Lynn Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155: 1967, pp. 1203-1207.
[34] White, p. 1205.
[35] White, p. 1207.

religious solutions to environmental problems. He said, "both our present science and our present technology are so tinctured with orthodox Christian arrogance toward nature that no solution for our ecologic crisis can be expected from them alone. Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not."[36] Christianity retained some corrective elements to the extractive, exploitative, and anthropocentric popular culture. He concluded his essay with a call for the recognition of St. Francis of Assisi as "a patron saint for ecologists."[37]

Within White's thesis, though, lay greater theoretical implications. By connecting anthropogenic environmental degradation to Christian teachings, White essentially drew a direct connection between religious values and environmental practices. Christianity served as a base of values from which humans drew, whether consciously or not, when conceptualizing their place in and duties to nature. If this was true, White concluded, it must be true that finding and elevating more environmentally benign religious values would lead to changes in environmental behaviors. He argued, "what we do about ecology depends upon our ideas of the man-nature relationship. More science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecologic crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one."[38] With this statement, White opened the door for more constructive and critical work on the relationships between religions and nature.

While some theologians and scholars reacted against what they viewed as White's overly critical and simplistic perspective,[39] others took White's suggestions seriously and

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[36] White, p. 1207.
[37] White, p. 1207. White probably meant "environmentalists" here rather than scientific ecologists.
[38] White, p. 1206.
[39] In "Social Science on Religion and Nature," *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* (Continuum: London, 2005), pp. 1571-1577, James Proctor and Evan Berry showed that quantitative research has yet to prove such a connection between values and practices. On the other hand, the research of Willett Kempton, James S. Boster, and Jennifer A. Hartley showed a deep and complex connection between religious beliefs

began exploring in greater detail the body of environmentally friendly values available in world religions. In 1991, several religious studies scholars interested in the interplay between religions and the environment formed the "Religion and Ecology Consultation" at the annual American Academy of Religion conference. Due to its popularity, the consultation became an official group in 1993. The Forum on Religion and Ecology formed out of these meetings and, along with the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard University, hosted a series of conferences entitled "Religions of the World and Ecology" from 1997 to 2004. Out of these conferences emerged a ten-volume book series focused on ecologically-friendly beliefs and practices within many world religions.[40]

Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, the editors of the series, acknowledged their theoretical debt to Lynn White along with the tension between religious values and environmental practices. The contemporary complex ecological crisis, they argued, "is also a moral and spiritual crisis which, in order to be addressed, will require broader philosophical and religious understandings of ourselves as creatures of nature, embedded in life cycles and dependent on ecosystems. Religions, thus, need to be reexamined in light of the current environmental crisis."[41] Tucker and Grim considered their work as a continuation of White's constructive conclusion, seeking "the minimum common ground on which to base constructive understanding, motivating discussion, and concerted action

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and environmental values among Americans. See Kempton et al., *Environmental Values in American Culture* (MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, 1995).

[40] Taylor, Bron, "Religious Studies and Environmental Concern," *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, (Continuum: London, 2005), pp. 1373-1379.

[41] Tucker, Mary Evelyn and John Grim, "Series Forward," Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Berthrong (eds), *Confucianism and Ecology: The Interrelation of Heaven, Earth, and Humans*, (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 1998), pp. xv-xxxi: p. xvi.

in diverse locations across the globe."[42] While White assumed the connection between values and practices, Tucker and Grim more openly recognized the difficulties of that assumption. Such a disconnection alone, though, did not provide sufficient reason to abandon the project. They concluded, "while it is clear that religions may have some disjunction between the ideal and the real, this should not lessen our endeavor to identify resources from within the world's religions for a more ecologically sound cosmology and environmentally supportive ethics."[43] For Tucker and Grim, the problem of the relationship between values and practices could be temporarily set aside until alternative religious teachings could be found.

Tucker and Grim also acknowledged a great debt to the work of Thomas Berry and his call for the formulation of a new story to replace the environmentally alienating stories provided by Western culture. It is through Berry's work on the Universe Story and the Epic of Evolution that much of the previous work on religions and ecology has encountered and theorized the importance of religions as narratives.

According to Berry, the stories in which humans currently find themselves have proven themselves to be ineffective in dealing with environmental problems. Instead, humans need a new story based in evolutionary science. Berry describes the problem as follows: "we are in trouble just now because we do not have a good story . . . The old story, the account of how the world came to be and how we fit into it, is no longer effective."[44] According to Loyal Rue, another Epic of Evolution advocate, "human beings presently lack the intellectual and moral resources required to achieve solidarity and cooperation on a scale commensurate with the problems we collectively face. We

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[42] Tucker and Grim, p. xxiii.
[43] Tucker and Grim, p. xx.
[44] Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (Sierra Club Books: San Francisco, 1990), p. 123.

find ourselves spiritually maladapted to our environmental circumstances."[45] Berry and Rue propose evolutionary science and genetics as the source for this new story. Berry portrays worldwide acceptance of the Epic of Evolution as a key step in the movement from simplicity to complexity in the universe, "from a lesser to a great order of complexity and from a lesser to great consciousness."[46] For Berry, shifting to a new narrative will promote not only more positive environmental behaviors but aid in the general progression of existence from simplicity to complexity. Berry does not theorize the gap between values and practices, or significantly question if simply providing a new narrative will really solve environmental and social problems. Nonetheless, Berry's work remains influential to the founding figures of the Religion and Ecology field.

Besides Berry and the Forum on Religion and Ecology, environmental ethicists J. Baird Callicott and Max Oelschlaeger remain influential in theorizing religious values and environmental behaviors as well. In *Caring for Creation*, Oelschlaeger argued that, despite increasing popular interest in the environment, environmental problems only continue to worsen. This is because environmental organizations have failed to acknowledge the power of religion as an organization principle for human behaviors. For Oelschlaeger, the Judeo-Christian "Great Code" is currently the narrative structure most capable of challenging the dominant social paradigm of utilitarian individualism. "Caring for creation," he concludes, provides a point to which all people of faith might focus and begin to work together toward ecological sustainability.[47] J. Baird Callicott likewise looked to religions for environmental narratives. In *Earth's Insights*, Callicott

[45] Loyal Rue, "Epic of Evolution," in Bron Taylor (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* (Continuum: London, 2005), pp. 612-615: p. 614.
[46] Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (Bell Tower: New York, 1999), p. 26.
[47] Max Oelschlaeger, *Caring for Creation: An Ecumenical Approach to the Environmental Crisis* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1994).

explored the potentially "green" elements of numerous religions. While some religions were more environmentally-friendly than others, Callicott ultimately concluded that they could still coexist with emerging ecological knowledge. He said, ". . . an international environmental ethic firmly grounded in ecology and buttressed by the new physics will complement, rather than clash with, the environmental ethics implicit in the world's many indigenous traditions of thought."[48] Like Oelschlaeger, Callicott argued that religious teachings could coexist with and help promote ecological sustainability, and generally be environmentally beneficial.

The scholars cited above generally agree that religious values can promote environmentally friendly behaviors, thought it is not always clear just how they might do so. While they laid significant groundwork for the examination of religions and ecological narratives, other theorists can perhaps help move discussion regarding the relationships between religions and nature further.

New Sources for the Study of Religious Values and Environmental Practices

The Forum on Religion and Ecology and the works of environmental ethicists such as Callicott and Oelschlaeger have defined the study of religions and nature for over a decade. However, more recent insights from other philosophers and religion scholars could help broaden the study and help us (scholars and activists) better understand how specific communities understand the connections between their religious beliefs and their environmental practices as they work toward environmental sustainability or the remediation of specific environmental problems. For some individuals and communities

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[48] J. Baird Callicott, *Earth's Insights: A Multicultural Survey of Ecological Ethics from the Mediterranean Basin to the Australian Outback* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1994), pp. 209-210.

facing real environmental problems, such as the residents of Central Appalachia who suffer the heavy social, ecological, economic, and health effects of mountaintop removal, religions become powerful narratives of resistance against the dominant extractive culture. Theoretical work helpful for considering religions as communal narratives of environmental resistance includes the narrative theory of Arran Gare (inspired by the philosophy of Alasdair MacIntyre), the "cognitive science of moral understanding"[49] of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, the "place-based perceptual ecology" of Mitchell Thomashow and related "ethics-based epistemology" of Jim Cheney and Anthony Weston, and Robert Orsi's work on lived religion. Though diverse, each of these theoretical groupings provides valuable insights for reconsidering the connections between religions and environmental protection.

Narrative Theory and Postmodernity: Gare and MacIntyre

For Arran Gare, the condition of postmodernity and its concomitant skepticism of metanarratives have removed from humanity a necessary tool for solving large-scale environmental problems. Without grand narratives, he claims, resolution of global problems such as environmental degradation becomes impossible. He argues,

> environmental problems are global problems and their causes are global; it will be impossible for stories to effectively orient individuals for effective action to overcome these problems unless the stories pertaining to people's individual lives and to local problems can be integrated with broader narratives, and ultimately with a grand narrative revealing the relationship between the lives of individuals and the dynamics of the global political and economic order.[50]

[49] Mark Johnson, *Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1993), p. 11.
[50] Arran Gare, *Postmodernism and the Environmental Crisis* (Routledge: London, 1995), p. 140.

Postmodern, or more specifically poststructural, philosophy leaves no ground for generating effective solutions to global ecological crises. Like Oelschlaeger and Berry, Gare proposes the formulation of new polyphonic grand narrative that at once recognizes the damages done by previous grand narratives and at the same time provides common ground for developing solutions to global environmental problems based largely on the narrative theory of Alasdair MacIntyre.[51]

In his important work *After Virtue*, MacIntyre sought to reestablish a foundation for morality in light of popular emotivism, or the idea that "all moral judgments are nothing but expressions of preference."[52] MacIntyre located that foundation in revised Thomistic and Aristotelian virtue ethics. A central element of MacIntyre's revised virtue ethics was the importance of narrative traditions. Humans exist within and are beholden to a series of nested relationships and narratives. Individuals are both actors in and authors of the narratives within which they find themselves situated, but individual control is not complete. Instead, MacIntyre considers individuals to be co-authors of their own narratives along with other individuals, nature, and historical and cultural factors. He says, "we enter upon a stage which we did not design and we find ourselves part of an action that was not of our making. Each of us being a main character in his own drama plays subordinate parts in the dramas of others, and each drama constrains the others."[53] Though individual control over narratives is not absolute, searching for the truth necessarily entails discovering the narratives of life. MacIntyre famously argues, "… man is in his actions and practices, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling

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[51] Gare, 1995, pp. 140-141. Gare borrows the term "polyphonic grand narrative" from Mikhail Bakhtin.
[52] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame University Press: Notre Dame, IN, 2007 [1981]), p. 12.
[53] MacIntyre, p. 213.

animal. He is not essentially, but becomes through his history, a teller of stories that aspire to truth. But the key question for men is not about their own authorship; I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'"[54] Individuals continually negotiate their places within multiply nested narrative traditions.

For Gare, MacIntyre's work on the narrative base of morality holds important implications for challenging postmodern ethical fragmentation and developing new narratives more in tune with the needs of denigrated ecosystems, or in his words, "conceiving lives as stories indissociably related to broader narratives provides the basis for reconceiving the very nature of ethics, returning the field of ethics to the mainstream of culture from which it had been banished by the atomization of society, the development of capitalism and the triumph of scientific materialism."[55] Actively co-authoring new narratives, he continues, is a radical process involving deep changes in other elements of global society, or as he says, "because lived narratives are projects of action, their reformulation requires, and provides the means for, a reevaluation and transformation of the broad social projects that people are engaged in and in terms of which all particular projects must ultimately be defined and justified."[56] Such changes are necessary for the resolution of the contemporary global environmental crisis.

Though Gare ultimately distances himself from MacIntyre in formulating his new, ecological polyphonic grand narrative, he maintains that MacIntyre's work remains a

[54] MacIntyre, p. 216.
[55] Arran Gare, "Narratives and the Ethics and Politics of Environmentalism: The Transformative Power of Stories," *Theory and Science*, 2001: p. 8. Online at http://theoryandscience.icaap.org/content/.
[56] Arran Gare, "MacIntyre, Narratives, and Environmental Ethics," *Environmental Ethics* 20 (1), 1998: pp. 3-22: p. 14.

necessary corrective to the failure of the contemporary environmental movement.[57] Gare states, "if MacIntyre is right, the beliefs that matter for how people choose to live and act are those embodied in the narratives they are living out . . . Consequently, if people are to change the way that they live, if they really are to live in a way that is ecologically sound, then their lives and the institutions and traditions of which they are part must be constituted by different narratives than they are at present."[58] In other words, MacIntyre's work on the relationship between ethics and narrative shows that, for genuine change to occur in human environmental behaviors, the multiple narratives in which we find ourselves must change as well. Gare emphasizes political and economic theory as an element of this new narrative, but it seems equally reasonable that environmentally-friendly religious narratives remain applicable as well. In the case of religious resistance to mountaintop removal, such changes may already be underway.

Metaphors and the Mind: Lakoff and Johnson

While Gare, following MacIntyre, argued that changes in environmental behaviors required changes in narratives, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson looked to cognitive science, arguing that human cognition is basically metaphorical in nature. While their "cognitive science of moral understanding"[59] was not explicitly related to environmental ethics, it nonetheless provided important concepts, such as the embodied mind and the metaphorical structure of cognition, for theorizing relationships between religious values and environmental ethics.

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[57] Gare 2001.
[58] Gare 1998, p. 7.
[59] Johnson 1993, p. 11.

In their early work *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson argue from linguistic evidence that human cognition is basically structured metaphorically, where one thing is understood and experienced in terms of another.[60] Importantly, these metaphors are largely based in experiences and orientations in the natural world. For example, up and ahead are generally considered good while down and behind are generally considered bad. Because of the power this metaphorical form holds in Western culture, saying "more is better" often makes more cultural sense than saying "less is better." While many individuals advocate a "less is better" perspective, they do so in challenge to the more prominent dominant social paradigm that advocates continued consumption.[61] Though Lakoff and Johnson do not draw this conclusion, it seems likely practical changes in environmental practices, such as limiting consumption, require changes in deeply seeded cultural metaphors. As they say, "the most fundamental values in a culture will be coherent with the metaphorical structure of the most fundamental concepts in the culture."[62] Since cultural values are related to cultural metaphors, changes in one will result in changes in the other.[63]

Lakoff and Johnson wrote more specifically about nature and religious thought in their later work, *Philosophy in the Flesh*.[64] In this book, Lakoff and Johnson argue "the properties of mind are not purely mental: they are shaped in crucial ways by the body and brain and how the body can function in everyday life."[65] Minds and cognition are

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[60] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1980), p. 5.
[61] Oelschlaeger 1994.
[62] Lakoff and Johnson 1980, p. 22.
[63] Lakoff and Johnson remain unclear on causal connection. Must metaphors change before values can change, or do new values generate new metaphors?
[64] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought* (Basic Books: New York, 1999).
[65] Lakoff and Johnson 1999, p. 565.

always embodied, shaped by history, culture, and the natural world. Toward the end of the book, Lakoff and Johnson take up the implications of this embodied theory of mind for religions. Religious feeling, they argue, entails feelings of transcendence, but transcendence is really "empathetic projection," or the projection of our own experiences onto others. Religions utilize humanity's natural tendency to metaphorical thought, as they say, "an ineffable God becomes vital through metaphor."[66] Religious experiences are always filtered through metaphorical structures. Importantly, the embodied nature of the mind ties religious metaphor to nature. They argue,

> The environment is not an 'other' to us. It is not a collection of things that we encounter. Rather, it is part of our being. It is the locus of our existence and identity. We cannot and do no exist apart from it. It is through empathetic projection that we come to know our environment, understand how we are part of it and how it is part of us. This is the bodily mechanism by which we can participate in nature, not just as hikers or climbers or swimmers, but as part of nature itself, part of a larger, all-encompassing whole. A mindful embodied spirituality is thus an ecological spirituality.[67]

We are participants within the natural world and co-authors of the narratives in which we live. Religions, or at least embodied spiritualities, do not always disconnect us from awareness of nature, but on the contrary, can foster a deeper connection with the environment.

Lakoff and Johnson's theory helps us conceive of how religions and the people who believe them are connected to the natural world. They propose a theory of mind that views religions as potential tools for environmental reconnection. The implications of this for the study of religion and nature are immense. Their theory adds support to the idea that new, environmentally-centered religious narratives may help promote more

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[66] Lakoff and Johnson 1999, p. 567.
[67] Lakoff and Johnson 1999, p. 566

sustainable human behaviors. This theory helps understand religions (or in the context of this paper, Appalachian mountain religion) as metaphorical structures helping to refocus cultural values toward a more environmentally and socially sustainable end.

Attending to the Ethics of Places: Cheney, Weston, and Thomashow

"Environmental Ethics as Environmental Etiquette," by Jim Cheney and Anthony Weston, represents a third conceptual source for the study of values and practices. In this article and elsewhere, the authors argue that traditional environmental ethics operate from faulty premises. In the old method, "epistemology-based ethics," ethical principles are agreed upon first then applied to the natural world. Instead, Cheney and Weston advocate "ethics-based epistemology," or the idea that ethical principles develop over time and continued interaction with specific places.[68] The goal of environmental ethics is to develop what Mitchell Thomashow calls a "place based perceptual ecology," or a system of attending to the interconnections of specific places with global ecological patterns.[69]

Cheney and Weston found examples of ethics-based epistemology in Native American traditions, saying, "many indigenous people . . . are concerned with the right relationship to those beings that populate their worlds, they are concerned with mindfulness, 'respect.'"[70] While acknowledging that most people neither can nor should follow Native American practices, Cheney and Weston nonetheless believe that indigenous societies provide valuable examples for fostering environmental ethics,

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[68] Jim Cheney and Anthony Weston, "Environmental Ethics as Environmental Etiquette: Toward an Ethics-Based Epistemology," *Environmental Ethics* 21 (2), 1999: pp. 115-134.
[69] Mitchell Thomashow, *Bringing the Biosphere Home: Learning to Perceive Global Environmental Change* (MIT Press: Cambridge, 2002), p. 5.
[70] Cheney and Weston, p. 122.

primarily in their ceremonial and narrative structures. Most importantly, these indigenous ceremonies and narratives are grounded in specific landscapes—they are contextualized. In another article, Cheney says, "narrative is the key, then, but it is narrative grounded in geography rather than in a linear, essentialized narrative self."[71] Narrative is a crucial tool for humans to connect to their environments. Like Gare, though, Cheney notes the importance of acknowledging the insights of postmodern skepticism of narratives.

Like Gare, Lakoff, and Johnson, Cheney and Weston argue that narratives remain a valuable way to engage with the natural world and change behaviors. However, Cheney and Weston emphasize that narratives must be localized, or based in specific places and histories. Though they cite indigenous traditions, it is possible that Appalachian mountain religion provides another example of such a localized narrative. Activists who retain connections to mountain religion remain connected to important narrative structures and social histories. Rather than being imposed from outside sources, mountain religion is being utilized and altered by locals in response to perceived needs to protect communities and ecosystems. It is becoming in the hands of some a localized narrative of resistance.

Lived Religion: Robert Orsi

Lived religion is a historical perspective and methodology, inspired in large part by work in the sociology of religion, focusing on how religious teachings and materials are used by laypersons in everyday situations. Religious resistance to mountaintop

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[71] Jim Cheney, "Postmodern Environmental Ethics: Ethics as Bioregional Narrative," *Environmental Ethics* 11 (3), 1989: pp. 117-134, p. 126.

removal reveals several important characteristics of lived religion, primarily creativity and protest. For Robert Orsi, an early advocate and articulator of the lived religion perspective, "religion comes into being in an ongoing, dynamic relationship with the realities of everyday life," not merely private assent to theological principles, as has often been assumed in the study of North American religious history.[72] Religion is inevitably a process of cultural bricolage that cannot be "separated from the material circumstances in which specific instances of religious imagination and behavior arise and to which they respond."[73] He continues, "all religious ideas and impulses are of the moment, invented, taken, borrowed, and improvised at the intersections of life."[74] In other words, a lived religion perspective cares about religion in practice, "the key questions concern what people do with religious idioms."[75] Emerging in specific circumstances, religion also embodies the many conflicts of everyday life. The study of lived religions "emphasizes dissent, subversion, and resistance, rather than harmony, consensus, and social legitimation."[76]

While Orsi's work generally neglects issues of religions and nature, others have expanded upon his work to show that environmental issues and practices are just as deeply integrated into religious frameworks as other issues. In *At Home in Nature*, Rebecca Kneale Gould examines homesteaders as practitioners of a form of nature religion. The lived religion perspective helps Gould see religious elements in everyday practices. The religion of homesteading entails certain reverence for nature as well as

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[72] Robert Orsi, "Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion," in David D. Hall (ed.), *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1997), pp. 3-21: p. 7.
[73] Orsi 1997, p. 7.
[74] Orsi 1997, p. 8.
[75] Robert Orsi, "Is the Study of Lived Religion Irrelevant to the World We Live In?," Special Presidential Plenary Address, Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42 (2), 2003: pp. 169-174, p. 172.
[76] Orsi 1997, p. 15.

resistance to mainstream society.[77] In this way, it parallels more green elements of Appalachian mountain religion. Samuel Snyder likewise employs the lived religion methodology in his study of the religion of fly fishing. For Snyder and his informants, fly fishing is a kind of religious practice. Theorizing it in these terms reveals to others the deep connections felt by fly fisherman toward their sport and environment.[78] Lived religion shows how individuals experience religion on a daily basis and incorporate their religious beliefs into their daily work. Religion is not just something done in church on Sundays, but a perspective (or narrative) that infuses individual worldviews and influences behaviors. Lived religion helps, at least somewhat, theoretically bridge the gap between values and practices.

Mountaintop Removal and Religious Narratives of Resistance

Together, the four theoretical streams examined above reveal the importance of narratives for environmental ethics and in the basic functioning of the human mind. While a new environmental grand narrative may be necessary to solve all of the world's contemporary environmental problems, there also exist multiple localized narratives emerging out of specific histories and geographies that are perhaps more relevant for more specific contexts. I believe that Appalachian mountain religion is an example of such a localized narrative. As Orsi's work shows, religions are constantly in flux, negotiated by their participants in response and resistance to other influences. From its beginnings, Appalachian mountain religion resisted outside cultural and theological

[77] Rebecca Kneale Gould, *At Home in Nature: Modern Homesteading and Spiritual Practice in America* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 2005).
[78] Samuel Snyder, "New Streams of Religion: Fly Fishing as a Lived, Religion of Nature," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 75 (4), 2007: pp. 896-922.

influences. Now, with the social and ecological devastation of mountaintop removal, mountain religion is being reinterpreted as a local narrative of resistance. Instead of devising new religions based on the teachings of evolutionary science, scholars might do better to attend to new religious formulations as they actually occur

Religious resistance to mountaintop removal is very much a bottom-up movement, driven by locals who respond to present social and environmental needs with the religious frameworks they understand best. Resistance occurs where individuals and communities must mediate between social, economic, religious, and environmental needs. As situated individuals, and following in the evangelical tradition of democratization, activists draw upon multiple cognitive resources to formulate their statements of dissent. Julia Bonds of the Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition provides a telling example of Appalachian religious dissent. Bonds made the following statement at a mountaintop removal protest: "never doubt that this is a battle between good and evil! And now is not a time to be silent. Now is a time to stand up and be counted for. The earth is God's body!"[79] In this statement she combines a dualistic evaluation of motivations (in keeping with a millennialist interpretation of events common to evangelicals) with a seemingly pantheistic ontology. She combines evangelical rhetoric with a radically immanent view of God's being (perhaps inspired by Sallie McFague). All of this is done without the cognitive dissonance that trained theologians might expect. Bonds is of course not a trained theologian and should not be held to overly strict standards of philosophical rigor. What is interesting about this short statement from a lived religion perspective is the way in which Bonds draws from two different and

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[79] Quoted in Bill Moyers's PBS documentary, "Is God Green?," Public Affairs Television, 2006. Transcript viewed online at www.pbs.org/moyers/moyersonamerica/green/index.html.

seemingly contradictory narratives to articulate her beliefs regarding the specific issue of mountaintop removal. In my own field work I have heard many similar statements amounting to a practical theocentric environmental ethic among Appalachian Christians. One activist, while explaining the practice of coal injection, offhandedly noted that coal seams natural lie under water tables "because God is good and made all things perfect."[80] This same activist noted that he moved from a more radical environmental group (Earth First!) to a faith-based group (Christians for the Mountains) because "what was most evident about God's existence was disappearing."[81]

Viewed with local history in mind, the comments of Bonds and the Christian activist mentioned above represent a continuation of the evangelical, Appalachian mountain tradition. As a mountain Christian, Bonds is free to preach on her own, deeply felt religious experiences, regardless of their theological consistency. She is also interested in the effects of mountaintop removal on her own community, continuing with the localism expected of Appalachian residents. In the case of Bonds and the other activist, mountain Christianity colors perceptions of nature and human duties to it. Analyzing these comments without consideration of this history and context fails to fully understand the diverse influences portrayed by these statements.

For the Appalachian Christians examined here, the earth belongs to God and reveals important elements to God's teachings. To exploit nature, as with mountaintop removal, is seen as an affront to the creator. This is a crucial element of the mountain religion environmental narrative. Because the natural world and its stability are tied to God, resistance to environmental devastation becomes a religious practice. Specific

[80] Author's field notes, March 2008.
[81] Author's field notes, March 2008.

readings of the Genesis stewardship mandate and theological perspectives on the power of God in the world become the basis for action against a specific problem—in this case, mountaintop removal. In Appalachia, religious values (connected in complex ways to other cultural, economic, and political beliefs) are directly connected to environmental behaviors, or more specifically, resistance to the environmentally devastating practice of mountaintop removal. While the Appalachian context cannot be recreated outside of the region, it remains an important case study on the place of religious narratives in resisting exploitative practices. The theoretical perspectives of Gare, Johnson, Cheney, and Orsi, among others, help us understand these connections and can perhaps help environmentalists and scholars find equitable solutions to contemporary environmental problems.

Conclusion

The specific theological elements of religious resistance to mountaintop removal may not translate outside of Appalachia, but the case study nonetheless reveals the power of popular religions in structuring dissent against the dominant culture and environmental exploitation. In the case of Appalachia, religious narrative is a crucial framework for the expression of environmental ethics. Those local Christian grassroots activists who put their ethics into action do so through this religious framework. Individuals like Judy Bonds generate new narratives based in older patterns at the intersection of values and practice, when environmental and social conflicts necessitate action. Bonds and other religious activists reveal to scholars the importance of religious narrative in formulating and supporting environmental values and the place of those values in constructing

patterns of action. The environmental crisis does not have simple solutions, but cases like that of religious resistance to mountaintop removal in Appalachia provide hope that, at least on the local level, people are shifting their perspectives and acting in the hopes of constructing a more ecologically sustainable future.