

ROUTLEDGE STUDIES IN RELIGION, TRAVEL, AND TOURISM

Pilgrimage to the National Parks

Religion and Nature in the United States

Lynn Ross-Bryant

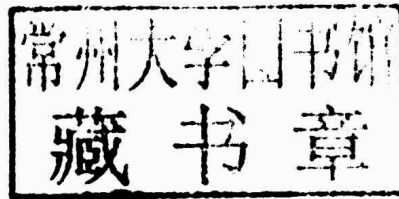
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Pilgrimage to the National Parks

Routledge Studies in Religion, Travel, and Tourism

1 Pilgrimage to the National Parks

Religion and Nature in the United
States

Lynn Ross-Bryant

For Elliott

Figures

0.1	<i>Winter, Yosemite National Park, 2007.</i>	17
1.1	<i>Yo-Semite Falls, 1855.</i>	31
1.2	<i>Yosemite Valley from Glacier Point, 1874.</i>	34
1.3	<i>The Rocky Mountains, Lander Peak, 1863.</i>	39
1.4	<i>Looking Down Yosemite Valley, California, 1865.</i>	40
1.5	<i>Grisley Giant, 1861.</i>	44
2.1	<i>Castle Geysers, Upper Geysers Basin, 1873.</i>	57
2.2	<i>Hot Spring Basin and Crater of the Castle, 1871.</i>	58
2.3	Traditional view of Old Faithful Inn, 1912.	65
2.4	Interior of Old Faithful Inn.	66
2.5	Geysers Hill, Upper Geysers Basin, 1977.	69
3.1	“Gee! We are going to see real, live Indians,” 1929.	86
3.2	Native Artisans Demonstrate at Hopi House, 1910.	87
3.3	“Native Roof Garden Party,” Potter Nampeyo and family members, 1905.	88
3.4	Harvey Girls at Grand Canyon.	100
3.5	Lobby, Glacier Park Hotel, 1920s.	108
3.6	Glacier Park Hotel.	110
4.1	Cars lined up for more than 1/2 mile waiting for a chance to get a permit, Yosemite, 1927.	132
4.2	Camping in Yosemite Valley, 1927.	134
4.3	Camp Curry’s Fire Fall.	138
4.4	Ranger Enid Michael dancing with bear, Yosemite, 1920.	140
4.5	Field Day, mounted and double mounted, 1929.	142
5.1	Dr. Harold C. Bryant conducting nature walk in Yosemite Valley, 1920.	154
5.2	Squire Bracebridge (Don Tressider) and the Peacock Pie, 1934.	173
6.1	<i>Stehekin River Forest, Northern Cascades, Washington, 1958.</i>	190

xii *Figures*

6.2	<i>Child in Mountain Meadow, Yosemite National Park, California, 1941.</i>	191
8.1	<i>Clearing Winter Storm, Yosemite National Park, California, 1940.</i>	236
8.2	<i>Clearing Autumn Smoke, Controlled Burn, 2002.</i>	237
8.3	<i>African American Cavalry, Yosemite, 1899.</i>	239
8.4	<i>Evening Glow of Yosemite Waterfall, Yosemite National Park, no. 23 of the World Landscape Series, 1930.</i>	240
8.5	<i>Woman at Inspiration Point, 1980.</i>	243
8.6	<i>One-and-a-Half Domes, Yosemite National Park, 1976.</i>	244

Foreword

Philanthropic public service takes a variety of forms. Some people gather supplies for food banks, spend a weekend in open space as volunteer trail-builders, or serve as members of commissions and task forces in local government. In a pattern well worth amending, comparatively few scholarly works earn a place in this admirable category of philanthropic enterprise. Although it is a significant scholarly work, *Pilgrimage to the National Parks: Religion and Nature in the United States* also lands solidly in the category of charitable contribution to the world's well-being.

Lynn Ross-Bryant's contribution rests on her strenuous labors in reading, analyzing, and interpreting a vast collection of books, articles, and documents. If we could not benefit from her Herculean exertions, those of us who are interested in public lands—and in the whole conundrum of how humans and nature are to share the planet—would be bobbing in an area of thought and expertise that is in constant flood-stage. Synthesizing an enormous domain of literature, navigating with nimbleness through a range of disciplines, directing us to examples and case studies that orient and guide us, Ross-Bryant performs a lasting act of public service, operating in a manner rather like a rafting guide in keeping us from capsizing and sinking under complexity. With this particular guide, there is amusement as well as serious analysis in this intellectual outing, with the amusement often delivered by artfully selected quotations and illustrative details. If we must live with the sorrow of having been born too late to attend the performances staged by Garnet Holme, "Pageant Master for the National Park Service in the Late 1920s," we can at least have the latter-day pleasure of reading Ross-Bryant's summary of his Yellowstone pageant, "Sanctuary": "The second part was an allegory in which Uncle Sam [is] persuaded by nature, wild animals, and trees to declare that the Land would be for the Common Good. The geysers dance (in the form of fair maidens) and real bears and birds are brought in to witness the dance." The dancing geysers bring to mind an experience recounted by the distinguished environmental historian William deBuys. On his own pilgrimage through the geyser basin in Yellowstone and toward middle age, he encountered a pair of international visitors, a father and son, with distinctive accents. "Daddy," the little

boy said to his father, in a remark that deBuys found himself taking personally, “this is a wonderful visit. I would like to see more of these geezers.”

Just as important for the cause of public service, Ross-Bryant brings to all of her undertakings a distinctive equanimity, tranquility, and grace of spirit. When the subject is the national parks, these virtues are of heightened value. Even though their supporters have sometimes represented national parks as places remote from human strife, the parks have also been battlegrounds, sometimes—as with the displacement of Indian people—in the most literal sense. More often, the weapons of battle have been lawsuits and legislation, statements of policy and countering statements of dismay and protest. Because Ross-Bryant’s opening premise is that the parks have, from their origins, been sites of contest among conflicting values, she is never caught by surprise or undone by the intensity of feeling that their management and use can arouse. “Economic and political contestations are central to the parks’ existence,” she declares in the Introduction. As Ross-Bryant makes her persuasive case for recognizing that seemingly secular attitudes and convictions have many of the qualities of religious belief, readers will find themselves thinking, “*That* would explain why people have sometimes fought as if their very souls were at stake in these matters!”

In truth, their souls *were* and are at stake. For every human being, in a point made lightly but poignantly by William deBuys’ story of his encounter among the Yellowstone geysers, every hour of every day registers as one step and station in the pilgrimage moving from birth to death. When a person undertakes a purposeful trip to a national park, a site widely understood to carry an especially forceful charge of value and meaning, that pilgrimage is a microcosm of the traveler’s larger journey through time. In this book, Ross-Bryant harvests the stories and reflections that came into being through hundreds of these journeys. Readers who travel with her will find that they move toward an intellectual destination where seemingly opposite qualities turn out to be neighbors living together in the national parks and, as Ross-Bryant argues near the end of the book, in adjacent areas separated from the parks only by permeable, easily crossed boundaries and jurisdictions.

The book itself follows the path of a journey, delivering readers to a conclusion that charts a path to a future in which tradition and change, rather than being pitted against each other, forge an alliance on behalf of both human and natural well-being. Rejecting the temptation (which many other commentators have found impossible to resist!) to lament the muddles and disappointments of decades of park management, with special sorrow reserved for the regrettable division of human beings and nature into two quarantined categories, Ross-Bryant instead sends the reader off with this valedictory: “What might be imagined through the national parks is mutuality, not only of humans, but also of the natural world of which humans are a part.”

Reading this book brought to mind another American utopian myth, one in which I am myself a believer. Democracy, this myth promises,

permits people of strong, seemingly opposed opinions, opinions that define good and evil in stark terms, to speak and listen to each other; they can then deliberate on and choose courses of action that serve a common cause. The early years of the twenty-first century have not been offering much validation for this bedrock myth of democracy. With comparatively few scholars showing the bravery and persistence that synthesis requires, scholarly specialization and fragmentation now make an uncomfortably close match to the contention and divisiveness of interest groups and splintered cohorts of advocacy.

And yet the coexistence of conflict and cooperation in democracy can be and has been—not a fantasy or pipe dream—but a realized ideal. With thinkers like Lynn Ross-Bryant to guide us through the contested terrain of the past and present, that ideal moves into our reach.

Patricia Nelson Limerick
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University of Colorado, Boulder

Acknowledgments

My decade-long journey through both the physical terrain and the history and meanings of the national parks would not have been possible without the wisdom and assistance of many people.

Thanks first to my parents, Kenny and Carol, who initiated me and my sister Gloria into the wonders of national parks at an early age; and next to my husband Elliott and son Marko, with whom I've explored the parks I write about in this book, and to my daughter-in-law Jessica who joined us for the Alaskan adventure. I'm most grateful to Elliott, who spent long hours hiking trails, while I explored the archives of countless parks.

Most helpful for understanding the values and beliefs found in the parks, which I saw changing through the decade, were the rangers I heard at campfire programs, interviewed, or who helped me in libraries and archives both in the parks and at the Denver Service Center. Here is an incomplete list of these helpful people: Rocky Mountain: Judy Visty, the late Ferrel Atkins, Janet Robertson, the late Randy Jones, Vaughn Baker, Larry Frederick. Glacier: Joe Decker, Scott Gediman, Deirdre Shaw. Grand Canyon: Judy Hellmich. Grand Teton: Mike Nicklas, Rich Vedorcheck, Tom Laney, Christine Smith, Martha Williamson. Yellowstone: Judy Knuthfolts, Harold Housley, Paul Schullery, Rich Jehle, Katy Duffy. Alaskan parks: Blanca Stransky, Smitty Parratt, Susan Martin. Denver Service Center: Carol Simpson, Catherine Kisluk, and other librarians and archivists. Thanks also to Dave and Janet Panebaker, who served in many of these parks; John Winsor, Mike Clark, and Ed Lewis of the Greater Yellowstone Coalition; and Richard Sellars, park historian.

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And thanks to those incredible places that continue to inspire and challenge me.

Lynn Ross-Bryant
Steamboat Springs, Colorado
February, 2012

Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	xì
<i>Foreword</i>	xììì
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xvii

Introduction: Our National Parks	1
Religion	3
The Nature of Nature	4
Pilgrimage and Tourism	6
Myth and Ritual	7
Contestation and Heterogeneity	10
Storied Sacred Space	12
The Evolution of the National Parks as Pilgrimage Sites	14
America's Best Idea	16

PART I

The New World

Introduction to Part I: America Comes of Age	21
1 Yosemite: New World Sublimity	26
The Newness of the New World	27
The American Experience in Yosemite	30
The Art of Perception	37
Preserved for the People	45
2 The Dream of Yellowstone: Progress in the Pristine Land	50
Wonderland	52
The Tools of Art and Science in the Construction of Yellowstone	56
Civilizing Nature	61
Nature and Technology	67

PART II

Wilderness and Beyond

Introduction to Part II: The Age of Anxiety	73
3 Seeing America in Grand Canyon and Glacier National Parks	79
Creating the “Titan of Chasms”	79
Living Ruins	81
The Great Unknown	90
Pilgrimage to the Shrine of the Ages	95
Preservation and Conquest in Glacier National Park	101
Reenacting the Strenuous Life	102
Construction of a Frontier Park	105
The Glacier Pilgrimage	110
Indians and the National Parks	112
4 The National Park Idea	116
Prelude to the Establishment of the National Park Service	116
Selling the National Park Idea	122
A Second Origin Story	128
Automobile Pilgrimage—An Alternative Narrative	131
Rituals of the Pilgrimage: America around the Campfire	135

PART III

Competing Constructions of Wilderness

Introduction to Part III: Competing Constructions of Wilderness	149
5 Mythic and Scientific America	153
“Laboratory Out-of-doors”	153
Emergence of Alternative Narratives	158
The Culmination of the Mather-Albright Tradition	160
Change and Tradition in the Parks	165
Preservation “for the People”	170
6 The Wilderness Idea	175
Wilderness Beginnings	175
Mythic America: Wilderness as Eden and the Frontier	180
Ansel Adams’ Photography and the Religion of Nature	188
Rethinking Nature and Humans	193

7	Unbounded Possibilities	195
	Reconceptualization of Space	197
	A New Role for Science	198
	Imagining Ecosystems	201
	Alaska: Inhabited Wilderness	209
	Reimagining Nature and Culture	217
	Epilogue: Pilgrimage and the Future of the National Parks	224
	Change in Paradise	225
	The Dynamics of Change	226
	A Vision for the Future	232
	Pilgrimage in the Gaps	235
	<i>Notes</i>	251
	<i>Bibliography</i>	281
	<i>Index</i>	297

Introduction

Our National Parks

The Campfire Pageant, an important ritual in America's public religion,¹ was first celebrated in 1922, fifty years after Yellowstone was established as the first national park and it continued to be celebrated into the 1960s. An elaborate pageant reenacted the 1870 Washburn-Doan expedition's exploration of the Yellowstone area. In one version these leading citizens of Wyoming and the Montana territory sat around the campfire one evening, thinking of all the wonders they had seen and the experiences of the sublime that had overwhelmed them. And then their conversation turned, as one might expect of enterprising nineteenth-century community leaders, to considering the profit that might be made by making this land of wonders a tourist attraction. One of them asserted that a region of this grandeur should be set aside for all the people and managed by their government. Although one fellow protested that this sounded like socialism, the others all agreed, and thus was born, according to the story, the idea of the national parks. The play ended, "There is nothing more American than the term 'Our National Parks.'"²

This origin story of the national parks lost favor in the 1960s because of a contestation over some of the facts that were asserted in it;³ but from a perspective that seeks to understand the religious dimensions of the park idea and experience, it is quite clear that the actual verifiability of the facts is less important than what it tells us about what the Park stood for, the symbolic power it had for the American public. Even the contestation is an important part of the story we are exploring.

One reason national parks are so American is because the idea of nature has played a central role in U.S. politics, religion, and culture.⁴ Nature is a powerful symbol that recurs in many of the stories Americans tell about themselves and their country, stories of the feared wilderness or the challenging frontier; of bountiful agricultural land or treacherous mountains and deserts. Nature is the site of religious experience of God and of demonic temptations and dangers. It is the New World and the Promised Land, as well as the untamed wilderness full of "wild beasts and wild men." Nature, imagined in these many ways, has been a central image around which important issues, dreams, and violence have gathered in U.S. American history and particularly in its religious history.⁵