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INTO THE STACKS: ARTICLE RELAUNCH: "JACK-IN-THE-BOX FAITH"

Snakes and Spirits: The Human Problem in Modern American History[†]

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It was dark and muggy out, and five-year-old Harrell Spruill had to poop. He dared not run all the way to the outhouse, deep enough into the woods that even the adults avoided it at night for fear of "the snakes in the bushes." An older Spruill remembered dashing instead from his house to the edge of a cotton field, "keeping my eyes wide open, trying to look every which way at once for spooks."[1] Spruill's world, at least at night, was populated by snakes and spirits, the latter as real as the former.[2]

Snakes and spirits—taken here to mean nonhuman beings both natural and supernatural—twine through colonial and early American narratives, not only in nighttime fears but as real presences. From early American environmental and agricultural historians, we know that what appeared to the first Europeans on American shores to be a wilderness was also a landscape cultivated by generations of indigenous people.[3] Snakes thrived there, sacred beings but also material ones, coiled unseen behind fallen trees, partially submerged in murky coastal swamplands, sunning on warm stone. Spirits thrived too. Jon Butler is among a generation of historians who brought to life the world of spirits that humans—indigenous, European, African, each in distinct ways—saw and felt and knew all around them.[4] It was an enchanted world, teeming with more-than-human beings who lived in webs of relationship with one another and with the humans they outnumbered.

But Harrell Spruill was born in 1924, and his desperate midnight dash to the cotton field's edge happened in a world no longer enchanted, one in which snakes were only animals to fear and spirits more superstition than substance. At least, so goes the dominant narrative of the twentieth century United States. The webs of relationship in historical scholarship on the early United States give way in modern American historiography to narratives of

[†]This article has been updated since original publication. A notice detailing the change has also been published

[1]Harrell S. Spruill, *Harvesting the American Dream: From Farm to Classroom: The Spruill Journey* (Victoria, BC, 2006), 13.

[2]I have chosen to use the term "spirit" hereafter rather than Spruill's word "spook" because of the racist history of the term "spook." Spruill, a Black child of five, clearly used the word to mean something like ghosts or spirits.

[3]Kathleen Duval, *Native Nations: A Millennium in North America* (New York, 2024); Michael D. Harkin and David Rich Lewis, eds., *Native Americans and the Environment: Perspectives on The Ecological Indian* (Lincoln, NE, 2007); Shepherd Krech III, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (New York, 1999).

[4]Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, MA, 1990).

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separation and disconnection, of humans from one another, and of humans from both nature and spirit.[5]

Jon Butler identified some of the religious dimensions of this problem in his field-shaping 2004 essay "Jack-in-the-Box Faith." A shortage of historical scholarship on modern American religion meant that when religion did appear in modern histories, it seemed to come from nowhere—as if from a jack-in-the-box. The field of modern American religious history has since flourished. Neither current events nor historical scholarship now supports "the widespread conviction and assumption that the post-Civil War United States has been a society where religion receded, especially in public life."[6] Historians have worked to elucidate theologies and religious practices that undergird modern politics across the political spectrum; to understand both the Protestant shape of secular institutions and the broad array of traditions and practices that challenge simple frameworks of Christian pluralism and inclusion; to describe and define the limits of the co-constitution of religion, race, gender, and capitalism in the modern world. Historians across subfields have a much clearer sense in 2025 than in 2004 of the reality that religion suffuses modern life, both in private and in public.[7]

Yet, it remains singularly difficult for historians to tease out of our sources the relationships between human beings and more-than-human beings. This is an interpretive conundrum for historians of religion and environment alike: While religious historians try to understand how modern Americans experience what Robert Orsi calls the "real presence" of sacred beings, environmental and agricultural historians work to understand how modern Americans experience our place in the natural and built worlds around us, as well as our relationships to the planet's nonhuman beings.[8] For both groups, textual archives—church records, government documents, memoirs like Spruill's, scientific research records—are essential. Physical archives—archaeological discoveries, tree rings, holy sites, ghost forests, and living swamps—also offer important evidence of the more-than-human relationships that shape human histories.

Is the story of a ghost forest—a striking name for a stand of dead trees—environmental history, or is it religious history? For the most part, these two fields have developed on separate tracks. Yet it is difficult to describe human relationships to more-than-human beings if we draw neat lines between those of matter and those of spirit, if environmental historians trouble themselves primarily with Spruill's snakes and religious historians primarily with his spirits.

Neither snakes nor spirits much concerned the historians who wrote about religion and environment following the emergence of the environmental movement in the 1960s and 1970s. An influential 1967 essay in *Science* by historian of technology Lynn White Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," set the terms for a conversation among scholars about the effects of Christian theologies on humans' relationship to nature. White dated human

[5]See Trent MacNamara, "Sky God: Remaking the Heavens and Divinity in the Nineteenth-Century United States," *Religion and American Culture* 32, no. 1 (Winter 2022): 30–67; Carolyn Merchant, *Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture*, 2nd edition (New York, 2013 [2003]); John Lardas Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America* (Chicago, 2011); and Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA, 2007).

[6]Jon Butler, "Jack-in-the-Box Faith: The Religion Problem in Modern American History," *Journal of American History* 90, no. 1 (Mar. 2004): 1360.

[7]For a sampling of this vast literature, see Melissa May Borja, *Follow the New Way: Refugee Resettlement Policy and Hmong Religious Change* (Cambridge, MA, 2023); Emily Suzanne Johnson, *This Is Our Message: Women's Leadership in the New Christian Right* (New York, 2019); Lerone Martin, *Preaching on Wax: The Phonograph and the Shaping of Modern African American Religion* (New York, 2014); Charles McCrary, *Sincerely Held: American Secularism and Its Believers* (Chicago, 2022); Dan Vaca, *Evangelicals Incorporated: Books and the Business of Religion in America* (Cambridge, MA, 2019); and Gene Zubovich, *Before the Religious Right: Liberal Protestants, Human Rights, and the Polarization of the United States* (Philadelphia, 2022).

[8]Robert A. Orsi, *History and Presence* (Cambridge, MA, 2016), 2. See also Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, 2004).

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separation from nature to medieval farming methods in northern Europe and tied those to Christian concepts of creation. He argued that "in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen." Christian scripture and theologies undergirded its destruction of "pagan animism" and thus "made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects."[9]

Since then, historians have worked to clarify the place of Christian thought both in ecological destruction and in the environmental movements of the twentieth century. Roderick Nash's 1965 *Wilderness and the American Mind* traced the concept of wilderness and its conquest to early Jewish and then Christian thought. Nash also identified a pro-wilderness turning point in American life, embodied in the conservation movement at the turn of the twentieth century and the environmental movement of his own era.[10] Mark Stoll followed in the Nash tradition by arguing that Calvinist natural theology undergirded the conservation movement and formed the activists who "transmuted conservation into mid-twentieth century environmentalism in the white-hot fires of moral urgency."[11] While Stoll laments the decline of Calvinist thought, religious studies scholar Evan Berry expresses more concern about its durability. In *Devoted to Nature*, Berry shows how "the internal logic of American environmental thought is wrapped up with the cultural hegemony of mainline Protestantism," and is thus limited in its response to ecological crisis by an emphasis on human depravity and redemption through nature.[12]

Historians have also traced a trajectory in Protestant environmental thought toward capital over conservation. Neall Pogue offers a vivid illustration of the limits of a Christian environmental ethic, tracing conservative Protestants' shift from a mid-century commitment to ecological stewardship to a flamboyant politics of anti-environmentalism.[13] Darren Dochuk's *Anointed with Oil* shows how "the dual authority of oil and religion rests at the heart of America's modern moment" by describing a century-long showdown between conservative Protestant elites and upstart evangelicals not over the preservation of the nation's natural resources but over the power that they offer.[14]

Scholars who look beyond white Protestant theologies and politics offer a different set of frameworks for thinking about human relationships to more-than-human beings. Catherine Albanese has argued throughout her half-century-long career that multiple and interweaving religious traditions shape American life. With an abiding interest in nature religion, metaphysical religion, and religious diversity, Albanese traces the trajectories of American thought about nature but also emphasizes the place of emotion and the body in

[9]Lynn White Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (Mar. 10, 1967): 1203–7.

[10]Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 5th edition (New Haven, 2014 [1965]). See also Donald Worster, *The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Ecological Imagination* (New York, 1993); Carolyn Merchant, *Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture* (London, 2003); Thomas Dunlap, *Faith in Nature: Environmentalism as Religious Quest* (Seattle, 2005).

[11]Mark Stoll, *Inherit the Holy Mountain: Religion and the Rise of American Environmentalism* (New York, 2015), 139. On the early-twentieth-century rural church movement as an embodiment of Christian concern over industrialization's effects, see Leigh Eric Schmidt, "From Arbor Day to the Environmental Sabbath: Nature, Liturgy, and American Protestantism," *Harvard Theological Review* 84, no. 3 (July 1991): 299–323; Christopher Hamlin and John T. McGreevy, "The Greening of America, Catholic Style, 1930–1950" *Environmental History* 11, no. 3 (July 2006): 464–99; Kevin M. Lowe, *Baptized with the Soil: Christian Agrarians and the Crusade for Rural America* (New York, 2016); and Larsen Baxter Plyler, "Fertilizing Faith: Religion and Rural Reform in the Deep South, 1908–1945," (PhD diss., Mississippi State University, 2019).

[12]Evan Berry, *Devoted to Nature: The Religious Roots of American Environmentalism* (Berkeley, 2015), 20. See also Rebecca Kneale Gould, *At Home in Nature: Modern Homesteading and Spiritual Practice in America* (Berkeley, 2005).

[13]Neall W. Pogue, *The Nature of the Religious Right: The Struggle Between Conservative Evangelicals and the Environmental Movement* (Ithaca, NY, 2022).

[14]Darren Dochuk, *Anointed with Oil: How Christianity and Crude Made Modern America* (New York, 2019).

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religion, which she describes as an "action system" shaped by creed, code (norms), cultus (ritual), and community.[15]

In this world, spirits—supernatural or more-than-human presences—come into focus. A host of ways of relating to the natural world likewise flourish, from a powerful tradition of Black environmental thought to the diverse religions that have moved for centuries along the Mississippi River.[16] Ethnographer Amanda Baugh's *Falling in Love with Nature* builds on this model, describing Spanish-speaking American Catholics not merely as victims of environmental injustice but also as environmental agents rooted in "a sense of relationality with family, the earth, and one's home."[17]

That web of relationship shaped the way settlers lay claim to indigenous land and myths, as well as the way that indigenous people made counterclaims. Jared Farmer's instant classic *On Zion's Mount* describes "how nonnatives became neonatives" as nineteenth-century Latter-Day Saints claimed Ute land in the nineteenth century and then in the twentieth bestowed on it sacred meaning through a reappropriation of Ute myths.[18] Alicia Puglionesi, Brandi Denison, and Erica Bsumek similarly show how white settlers—Protestant, Mormon, and even spiritualist—claimed native land and retold native histories for themselves. These scholars also emphasize the way that native people have continually contested those claims, reinforcing their own sacred connections to colonized lands and shaping white ideas about religion in the process.[19] Human action remains the focus here, yet we can begin to recognize in this kind of scholarship some of the ways that snakes and spirits wove through the landscape and the human relationships to it.

It is in the scholarship at the nexus of religious and agricultural history that Albanese's claims about the importance of emotion and the body emerge most clearly. Joseph Creech and Jarod Roll traced the emotional resonance of radical religion in multiracial agrarian protest movements, demonstrating the longstanding connection of religion to land in the South.[20] More recently, Lloyd Barba and Jonathan H. Ebel, in studies of mid-twentieth-century California farmworkers—Mexican Pentecostals and white Dust Bowl migrants, respectively—describe the embodied environmental knowledge that farmworkers carried with them. Barba brings to life irrigation ditch baptisms; Ebel narrates reformers' and migrants' moral warfare over the meaning of bodily filth and the proper use of modern toilets. Religion, here, is in the ditches and the sewers as much as it is in the minds of the nation's leading thinkers. In these books, finally,

[15]Catherine Albanese, *America: Religions and Religion* (Belmont, CA, 1981): 9–10.

[16]Kimberly K. Smith, *African American Environmental Thought: Foundations* (Lawrence, KS, 2007); Mark D. Hersey, *My Work Is That of Conservation: An Environmental Biography of George Washington Carver* (Athens, GA, 2011); Jamil Drake, *To Know the Soul of a People: Religion, Race, and the Making of Southern Folk* (New York, 2021); Michael Pasquier, ed., *Gods of the Mississippi* (Bloomington, IN, 2013); Peter J. Theusen, *Tornado God: American Religion and Violent Weather* (New York, 2020).

[17]Amanda Baugh, *Falling in Love with Nature: The Values of Latinx Catholic Environmentalism* (New York, 2024).

[18]Jared Farmer, *On Zion's Mount: Mormons, Indians, and the American Landscape* (Cambridge, MA, 2008).

[19]Brandi Denison, *Ute Land Religion in the American West: 1879–2009* (Lincoln, NE, 2017); Alicia Puglionesi, *In Whose Ruins: Power, Possession, and the Landscapes of American Empire* (New York, 2022); Erica Marie Bsumek, *The Foundations of Glen Canyon Dam: Infrastructures of Dispossession on the Colorado Plateau* (Austin, 2023). See also Brennan Keegan, "Contested Sacredness: The Struggle for Bears Ears," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 90, no. 4 (Dec. 2022): 836–59.

[20]Joe Creech, *Righteous Indignation: Religion and the Populist Revolution* (Champaign, IL, 2006); Jarod Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion: Labor and Religion in the New Cotton South* (Champaign, IL, 2008). See also Erik S. Gellman and Jarod Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class: Labor's Southern Prophets in New Deal America;* Alison Collis Greene, *No Depression in Heaven: The Great Depression, The New Deal, and the Transformation of Religion in the Delta* (New York, 2016); and Robert Hunt Ferguson, *Remaking the Rural South: Interracialism, Christian Socialism, and Cooperative Farming in Jim Crow Mississippi* (Athens, GA, 2018).

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Harrell Spruill's midnight run—poop and all—begins to seem like something more than a child's nighttime adventure.

The nonhuman turn, a late-twentieth-century interpretive shift in the social sciences and humanities, offers tools for approaching the more-than-human presences in Spruill's life.

Environmental historians, religion scholars, and anthropologists have embraced this shift, which recognizes that "making worlds is not limited to humans," as ethnographer Anna Tsing puts it.[21] Nor is religion "a strictly human phenomenon," as Aaron S. Gross shows in his influential study of kosher slaughterhouse practices in the United States.[22] Animal studies now shapes the field of religion more broadly: In her ethnographic study of immigrant religions, labor, and meatpacking in Iowa, for instance, Kristy Nabhan-Warren spent a day on the killing floor to learn about "the entangled relationships between nonhuman animals and the humans who kill them."[23] Katherine Mershon's pathbreaking dissertation on dogs as both religious symbol and religious subject demonstrates that the relationships humans form with companion animals, particularly rescue dogs, reflect our modern understanding of redemption—and its limits.[24]

The field of indigenous studies required no nonhuman turn to recognize the web of relationships in which humans are enmeshed with other beings.[25] Vine Deloria's (Standing Rock Sioux) *God Is Red* voiced a longstanding critique among native thinkers of Christian anthropocentrism.[26] George "Tink" Tinker (Osage Nation) comes at the question of nonhuman consciousness—and thus ability to participate in and make community—from the perspective of Indigenous ecological knowledge. For the Osage, Tinker explains, rock is "the oldest and wisest of all life forms": one with seniority to younger beings like humans; one who inhabits a longer, slower time scale than that of animate life forms; and one of the most durable.[27]

Drawing on both Indigenous studies and the nonhuman turn, environmental historian Marsha Weisiger showed the consequences of officials' failure to understand Indigenous relationships with more-than-human beings well into the twentieth century. In the 1930s, Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) agents concerned about overgrazing forced the reduction of sheep populations among Navajo (Diné) people. Yet they lacked the cultural tools to recognize the sheep as participants in Diné religion, essential to Diné origin stories, to their matrilineal social structures, and to their economy. The Diné still hold the BIA responsible not only for the loss of their sheep but for the resulting destruction of their wealth and way of life.[28]

[21]Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, 2015), 22. See also Wendy Doniger, "The Four Worlds," in *Animals in Four Worlds: Sculptures from India*, by Stella Snead, 3–24 (Chicago, 1989); Jared Farmer, *Trees in Paradise: A California History* (New York, 2013); Richard Grusin, ed., *The Nonhuman Turn* (Minneapolis, 2015); Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis, 2007); Tim Ingold, *Hunters, Pastoralists, and Ranchers: Reindeer Economies and Their Transformations* (Cambridge, MA, 1980); Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (Berkeley, 2011); and Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (New York, 2007).

[22]Aaron S. Gross, *The Question of the Animal and Religion: Theoretical Stakes, Practical Implications* (New York, 2015).

[23]Kristy Nabhan-Warren, *Meatpacking America: How Migration, Work, and Faith Unite and Divide the Heartland* (Chapel Hill, 2021), 173.

[24]Katherine Mershon, "Canine Redemption Narratives in the American Imaginary, 1981–2001," (Ph.D. diss., The University of Chicago, 2018).

[25]See, for instance, discussions of swamps in Malinda Maynor Lowery, *Lumbee Indians in the Jim Crow South: Race, Identity, and the Making of a Nation* (Chapel Hill, 2010); or of the Standing Rock Movement in Nick Estes, *Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock Versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (New York, 2019).

[26]Vine Deloria, *God is Red: A Native View of Religion* (New York, 1973).

[27]George "Tink" Tinker, "The Stones Shall Cry Out: Consciousness, Rocks, and Indians," *Wicazo Sa Review* 19, no. 2 (Fall 2004): 109. See also Kim Tallbear, "A Reflection on Working Beyond the Human/Not Human," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21 nos. 2-3 (June 2015): 230–5.

[28]Marsha Weisiger, *Dreaming of Sheep in Navajo Country* (Seattle, 2011).

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Reading these works together reveals a different problem from the one Butler described two decades ago. Scholars in these fields understand the importance of religion to the way that humans understand and interact with the environment. Yet just as BIA officials had to learn to recognize the relationship between Diné women and their sheep as a religious one, historians must learn to see religion not only in the beliefs and practices that structure our relationship to the natural world but also in that relationship itself, and in the more-than-human beings who are part of it. Those relationships shaped the lives not only of Indigenous people who could name them but also of Protestants and others who often could not. Our textual and physical archives are full of stories like Harrell Spruill's, stories of worlds at once human and more than human. Our collective survival depends on recognizing the more-than-human relationships that animate those worlds.

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