Wilderness in Public Theology: A Dialogical Approach

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This essay is co-written so that the authors can bring into explicit dialogue their distinct approaches to a public theology of wilderness. While differing in gender, generation, and theological formation, we share a commitment to inserting critical theology into US public life. We also share a concern that scholars currently working in public theology are not sufficiently responding to each other’s work. Even though theologians have increasingly claimed the term and the tasks of “public theology,” the reciprocal engagement among these theologians that would develop the field of public theology (as well as each public theologian’s own work) has been neglected.

To contribute to the desired critical discourse among public theologians, the topic of wilderness will be addressed here in a dialogical format in which the authors’ perspectives are mutually informing. Mary Doak’s work in public theology thus far focuses on attention to the role of the narrative imagination in public life, whereas Thomas Hughson has emphasized a Christological grounding for Christian social consciousness in the public sphere. In this essay, in the first part, “Wilderness as a Topic for Public Theology,” Doak will defend the importance of wilderness as a topic central to any adequate American public theology. In the second part, “Respect for Wilderness,” Hughson will analyze the concept of “wilderness” in American cultural history. In the third part, “Wilderness and American Exceptionalism,” Doak will then discuss the concept of wilderness as it has informed the develop-
ment of American exceptionalism. Hughson will conclude in “Wilderness as Eviction: A Critical Public Theology” by further exploring the role of an ideology of wilderness in the construction of the public sphere. Together these distinct approaches seek to demonstrate that the concept of wilderness is integral to Euro-American political ideals and so must be interrogated in US public theology.

Wilderness as a Topic for Public Theology (Mary Doak)

Public theology (as understood here) is the branch of theology that is explicitly committed to engaging American public life. As such, public theology undertakes a mutually critical correlation between aspects of politics, culture, and society in the United States, on the one hand, and religious beliefs and practices, on the other.1 Surely, wilderness (whether as the “unexpected wilderness” of global climate change or simply wilderness itself) is an apt topic for such a public theology. US environmental policies are affected by how society understands and values wilderness, an understanding that is informed by religious (though not necessarily theistic) beliefs about the goodness of nature and the role of humanity on earth.

Yet public theology has other reasons to be concerned with wilderness, reasons that go beyond the relevance of wilderness for environmental policies or support for nature preserves. Public theology should address wilderness also—and especially—because an adequate public theology must attend to the narratives through which people comprehend themselves and the sociopolitical issues they face. How we envision our collective social and national projects, including how we understand the inheritance and the debts of our past and what we hope to contribute to the future, is integral to how we think about and make judgments regarding specific public issues.2 In the United States, especially for Euro-Americans, this narrative self-understanding has been deeply informed by the concept of wilderness, and particularly by the early colonial commitment to transforming that wilderness into garden or city.3 In short, we misunderstand integral aspects of the political imagination as it functions in the United States when we ignore the influence of wilderness on Euro-American political goals.
A further reason for serious theological engagement with wild­
erness is that thinking about the natural environment interrupts
the tendency of much political theology (including American pub­
lic theology) to value history and time as the arena of freedom,
while dismissing nature and space as theologically insignificant
constraints. Thinking about wilderness requires that we reflect on
our spatial location, whether that be in “civilization,” in “wilder­
ness,” or in some combination thereof. Paying attention to the
public’s location and relation to nature curbs the tendency toward
an abstract or disembodied public theology that considers human
actions as though they occur in a vacuum. There is a stubborn—
and valuable—facticity in a shared place and in the presence of
others with whom we share that place. America is not merely a
historical project, after all, but also a place, a shared land (both
cultivated and uncultivated).

Exploring the public significance of wilderness, then, engages
an aspect of Euro-American experience that has deeply informed
the dominant forms of political imagination in the United States.
Reflecting on wilderness further highlights the complicated—and
often toxic—relationship of Euro-Americans to their natural
environment and to those often overlooked people who, though
relegated to the margins of US history and culture, nevertheless
share this land and the effects of US public policies.

Respect for Wilderness (Thomas Hughson, SJ)

Most English colonists in North America saw wilderness as an
unruly, hostile, cursed, heathenish antiparadise to be converted
into tilled field, cultivated garden, orchard, and pasture. Later,
eighteenth-century American Christianity, influenced by science,
the French Enlightenment, the Romantic movement, and H. D.
Thoreau, altered that evaluation from combative to appreciative.
In his magisterial Wilderness and the American Mind, Roderick
Frazier Nash remarked, “The concept of wilderness as a church,
as a place to find and worship God, helped launch the intellectual
revolution that led to wilderness appreciation.” Territories beyond
the frontiers were still other, but now with a touch of transcen­
dence. Accordingly, public debates about the fate of “wilderness”
to the west in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries embraced a
positive view of wilderness.
At the same time, forests and mountains in westward territories obviously housed vast stores of raw materials such as timber and ore. The plains offered space for expansion of agriculture. Through the nineteenth century, canals, railroads, westward trails, and eventually roads opened passage through lands European Americans had not settled. Wilderness also beckoned well-educated urban denizens of New York, Boston, and San Francisco to temporary respite from what they felt to be relentless and overcivilized striving. Camping allowed them to reclaim, as they saw it, their more elemental humanity, sometimes praised as a vigorous "manhood" [sic].

The American gaze toward continent-wide territory including wilderness, and not just the new republic’s political structures of democratic self-governance, belonged to a distinctive, developing, national self-understanding. In Gertrude Stein’s view, “In the United States there is more space where nobody is than where anybody is. That is what makes America what it is.”6 And, mused famed ecologist Aldo Leopold, “of what avail are forty freedoms without a blank space on the map?”7 Of course, indigenous peoples inhabited places where “nobody is,” those “blank spaces” on Euro-American maps.

In a Socratic spirit, though, what do we mean by the “wilderness” everyone speaks about? Nash pointed out that the concept of “wilderness” divides the natural world into two realms.8 There is what agriculture or the stamp of organized human presence has domesticated, and then there is the rest of nature. This unmanaged remainder is “wilderness.” Hebrew terms in the Scriptures, midbar, arabah, and jeshimon transmitted this meaning of wilderness. The Septuagint translated them into Greek as eremos, both a noun and an adjective. The Latin Vulgate carried the meaning in the word, desertum, translated into English as “wilderness.”

A prehistoric layer is the base of biblical, classical, and Christian meanings of a wild, scarcely inhabited place. Noted but not examined by Nash, that deepest layer gained meaning from a protracted historical event in human history. About 8500 BCE the beginnings of agriculture appeared in the Fertile Crescent, in China between 8000 BCE and 7500 BCE, in Meso-America ca. 7000 BCE, and in North America ca. 5000 BCE.9 Wilderness or equivalent terms and ideas referred to the mostly unmanaged nature hitherto the everyday environment, left largely unbent to...
human purposes by hunter-gatherers. The concept of “wilderness” was not possible before the transition from foraging to farming.

Recent and current research no longer conceives the transition as an agricultural revolution. Instead, scarcity bit by bit backed foragers in propitious surroundings into a millennia-long, multifactorial process that eventually became ubiquitous. Food production gradually demanded stable villages in which people performed regular tasks in view of future benefits. Agricultural settlements changed the way hunter-gatherers had related with nonhuman nature, even if they already lived in pre-agricultural villages like Eynan-Mallaha in modern Israel. Whereas most research has assumed that foragers scratched out a means to survival under pressure from hunger, a small school of thought now contests that assumption. Ian Hodder, Jacques Cauvin, and Barbara Bender point to, respectively, antecedent symbolic, religious, and social factors that incited the ancient transition.

Of potential theological interest, Cauvin acknowledges that the Fertile Crescent enjoyed favorable climatic, ecological, and biological conditions when Neolithic agriculture emerged after 9000 BCE. But he argues that such external factors were conditions permitting, not causing, agriculture, since they also let hunter-gatherers flourish. Cauvin concludes that agriculture originated as an invention of the mind and imagination: he argues from archaeological evidence of changes in religious symbols that a religious change toward reverence for Mother Earth triggered the momentous shift.

Lacking a contrast with agriculture, foragers like our ancient ancestors and most Native American tribes at the time of Columbus did not live in an environs nature they saw as a wilderness. To the contrary, observed Chief Standing Bear of the Oglala Sioux, “only to the white man was nature a wilderness.” His people “did not think of the great open plains, the beautiful rolling hills and the winding streams as ‘wild.’” That fact stirs a major suspicion about land that Euro-Americans called “wilderness.”

Nonetheless, Thoreau, Muir, and Leopold, along with many scientists, have extolled wilderness as creation on its own biotic terms in a pre-agricultural, nonindustrialized condition. What’s not for public theology to like and support in the interpretative concept and praxis of “wilderness”? Ought not public theology bring theological substance into public arguments on behalf of the
agenda of the Wilderness Society, and the Sierra Club (of which I am a dues-paying member)?

That wilderness is a public issue follows from the fact that the status of lands held in the US public domain presupposes a nation-state's original title to all land within its boundaries legally prior to parcels available to private ownership. Federal and state decisions determine which acreage will be incorporated into the 5 percent of public lands designated wilderness in the United States, including Alaska, or the 2 percent in the lower forty-eight states.¹⁵ Since the Wilderness Act of 1964 about 110 million acres of public land have received the designation. Designation as wilderness means no roads, no vehicles, no permanent structures. Approximately 100 million acres of federal wildlands not yet officially designated as wilderness are at present risk of commercial development.

Wilderness and American Exceptionalism (Mary Doak)

As Hughson reminds us, wilderness is a theoretical construct in which an undomesticated and so wild (or “self-willed”) nature is defined as distinct from the rural and urban landscapes shaped by and for humans. This concept of wilderness has been especially formative of the Euro-American sociopolitical imagination since colonial times, when settlers from Europe struggled to create a new society in what they saw as an untamed natural environment. Their Calvinist faith gave an initial meaning to this engagement with wilderness as a necessary stage in the journey to the promised land, the society they would establish in faith and justice.¹⁶ Having completed their transatlantic exodus from Europe, how could they not interpret this wilderness as their own prelude to a land flowing with milk and honey, destined (some hoped) to be the shining city of perfect harmony promised at the end of the Book of Revelation?

Since the biblical pattern suggests that wilderness is integral to the achievement of the promised land, wilderness is not merely a negative stage, to be avoided or passed through as quickly as possible. Interpreted through a biblical lens, the wilderness is a place not only of danger and temptation but also of clarification, purification, and reorientation, as it was for the Israelites in their exodus from slavery and for Jesus in his wilderness retreat before his public ministry. As David Williams has shown in his analysis
of American literature, wilderness has continued to function in the Euro-American imagination as a metaphor for the liminal state in which the self or society sheds an established identity in order to begin anew. Wilderness is thus a place of freedom and creativity as well as of perilous chaos.

It is not surprising, then, that when Euro-Americans sought to define a distinct national identity, they turned to their wilderness, as Hughson notes above. Unable to compete culturally with Europe, the newly founded United States could, and did, celebrate instead the “unspoiled” beauty of its vast wilderness. Indeed, the exceptionalism by which the United States and its people claim to be unique among nations is rooted (for good and ill) in this possession of (by European standards) exceptional wilderness, a rich natural source of personal and social renewal as well as of beauty. Americans think of themselves as exceptional in large part because they had (and, as long as there is sufficient wilderness, continue to have) a rare opportunity to begin afresh, to construct a new society and new selves untainted with the accumulated corruptions of centuries of civilization.

Even while this exceptionalism supports creative and reformist initiatives to improve self, society, and land, American exceptionalism has negative implications. There is a dangerous tendency in American exceptionalism to believe that the ideal has already been achieved. If we have already gone through the wilderness and emerged into the long-awaited shining city or garden/paradise, then there is no need for further reform (and perhaps then no need to preserve the wilderness). Hence American exceptionalism recurs in public life as the arrogant assumption that the people and institutions of the United States are morally superior to others.

Conversely, in those times when imperfections are acknowledged in US society, exceptionalism can encourage an irresponsible ahistoricism. Why take seriously the past (and the moral debts we have incurred) if we can simply begin again, return to the wilderness and create ourselves and our society anew? When a new self and a new nation are always possible, one can ignore the horrors of history, the hard work of reconciliation, and the just demands for restitution.

There is a great deal of hubris, then, as well as a spirit of initi­ative in the exceptionalism that understands the American project as one of converting its wilderness into a more perfect society.
However, the wilderness that is valued as the basis of transformation also has ways of resisting such hubris. Venturing into areas of wilderness, one quickly learns that nature is less malleable to human goals and new beginnings than American exceptionalism often assumes. There is, after all, a degree of the unexpected in all wilderness, precisely because it is wilderness—nature that is not controlled by humans. Nature is ultimately not only the source but also the limit of all human projects of civilization, a point that global climate change is making quite clear.

A very good example of characteristically Euro-American attitudes toward the wilderness—and the wilderness’s defiance of our hubris—can be found in the history of Death Valley National Park in southern California. Perhaps some of the attraction of Death Valley is that, like much of Euro-American culture, it tends to extremes. Holding the official record for the hottest temperature ever recorded, Death Valley is also incredibly dry, hostile to life, and stunningly beautiful.

Over 95 percent of Death Valley is designated wilderness, and in any case it is a place where nature remains 100 percent dangerous and undomesticated. Death Valley continues to live up to its name, as still today (and despite the roads, park rangers, and a few hotels) people die in the extreme heat and dryness there. The flora and fauna on the valley floor survive only because they have evolved to withstand the high temperatures, lack of water, and salination in the scant water supply.

Yet this inhospitable desert has inspired Euro-Americans to seek to transform Death Valley to serve human purposes and desires. Death Valley has been mined (more or less successfully for borax), planted with date trees, searched for a legendary gold mine, sold to gullible would-be pioneers as a lush and fertile place to settle (which it is not!), and is now part of the national park system with restaurants, inns, and marked hiking trails. In short, even as unpromising a place as Death Valley has inspired Euro-Americans to try to make Death Valley humanly useful and even lucrative. Perhaps most characteristically Euro-American is the extent to which Death Valley has figured in the con schemes of the hucksters who sold dreams of gold mines or fertile farm land (neither of which exist in Death Valley) to naïve easterners. It surely says something significant about the Euro-American
character that this stark and hostile terrain has inspired so many get-rich-quick schemes. 21

Interestingly, while Death Valley has been a place of dreams that brought great hardship and occasionally death to Euro-Americans, the Timbisha Shoshone people have lived in this brutally harsh place for over a thousand years. 22 They knew where the few natural springs are, and they were willing to eat a lot of chuckwalla, the rather plump lizards still plentiful in the canyons. It should also be noted that the Timbisha were not stupid—or arrogant—enough to stay on the valley floor during the summer, but retreated into the cooler mountains. Still, in a place where there is so little of what is essential to life, the fact that the Timbisha Shoshone survived here without the food and (especially) the water trucked into the lodge and restaurants today is truly impressive.

The Timbisha adapted carefully to the conditions in Death Valley, learning to live on very little and respecting their surroundings. Euro-Americans, with a tendency to see wilderness as a source of utopian possibilities, have had a less happy history of struggle, failure, limited success at best, and a lot of grief in Death Valley. The wilderness-inspired freedom to create and re-create ourselves and our surroundings can be a significant, and positive, force of reform but, as the remains of mines and ghost towns in Death Valley remind us, nature is not entirely at our command and will be here long after we are gone.

Wilderness as Eviction: A Critical Public Theology
(Thomas Hughson)

Ecofeminist theologian Sallie McFague has criticized identifying Christian love for nature with subscribing to protection of areas designated as wilderness. McFague points out that urban parkland, not wilderness, is the portal through which many more millions of urban fellow citizens, especially lower-income folks, walk into proximity with and grow in love with nature. 23 Her observation serves to steer public theology toward critical reflection on ideas, practices, and debates regarding wilderness.

Critical interrogation of the concept and legal status of wilderness has been under way for about twenty years. Until then three positions contended in the public sphere. One supported
laissez-faire commercial interest in timber, ore, oil, hydroelectric power, and real estate development. A second commitment sought to preserve intact large areas without development, permanent structures, roads, even marked trails, in order to maintain either a biotic, scientific reserve or to offer a primordial relation to nature that offsets the pressures of modern life. A third position, more common in Europe, advocated "wise use" that mixes respectful conservation of mountains, rivers, and forests with readiness for some extraction of natural resources and some recreational development.

However, the preservationist and wise use positions have to deal with a telling critique of the concept of wilderness that has arisen in the last twenty years. Independently of each other, Mark David Spence and Holly Miller have shown how the Euro-American concept of wilderness has had the effect of oppressing Native Americans. What is public theology to say in response to Spence's irrefutable argument that "uninhabited wilderness had to be created before it could be preserved"? Consider three instances of "preservation." In 1865, landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, designer of Manhattan's Central Park, advised the California legislature to preserve Yosemite Valley. This involved emptying Yosemite Park of the Yosemite tribe. In 1872, President Ulysses S. Grant inked the Yellowstone Park Act, preserving more than 2 million acres in Wyoming as Yellowstone National Park. The purpose was to prevent private acquisition and commercial exploitation of waterfalls, geysers, and hot springs. However, protecting wilderness partially caused Shoshone, Crow, and Bannock to be pushed out of Yellowstone and onto reservations. Similarly, preserving wilderness in Glacier Park impelled evicting the Blackfeet from the territory.

Black Elk, the Oglala Sioux shaman become Catholic catechist, saw this clearly. "Black Elk," notes Spence, "understood only too well that wilderness preservation went hand in hand with native dispossession." Compounding the dispossession, by 1893 an estimated 30 million bison on the Great Plains had been reduced to 400. A relentless slaughter took place that, intended or not, amounted to conquest of the land, food, culture, travel, and peoples of buffalo-hunting tribes.

In light of the difference between foraging and farming, the following can be asserted: The concept of wilderness not only
describes geographical areas but also perpetuates a pre-understanding of agriculture as superior to hunting and gathering. Native Americans relied heavily on hunting and gathering, though some tribes cultivated some plants, had dogs, and eventually used horses. Consequently, they and their way of life have borne the brunt of the ingrained Euro-American assumption of the superiority of agriculture that cannot be dissociated from the differential meaning of wilderness.

What, consequently, might public theology wish to say about the apparent paradox of wilderness as colonization rather than preservation? An unmet task will be to prevent the critique from ending up in political and corporate arguments as a premise for further neoliberal, capitalist commodification of nature. Perhaps the following offers a path both practical and theoretical. Postmodern anthropology recognizes contentious heterogeneity within any society and culture. No matter a common language and an aggregated history, diverse interests lead people and groups in any society to interpret the common situation variously. So too studies of the public sphere have pointed to plural public spheres in the United States. Several smaller public spheres revolve around minority experiences, interpretations, and debated opinions. One or more of the smaller public spheres may be a space for numerical minorities that provides opportunities for expressing a minority's resistance to domination by the majority.

The resistant spheres are subaltern public spheres. They may, or may not, form a mobilized subaltern public opinion that, as in the case of Americans of African descent, womanist, Latina/o, feminists, and LGBT associations, makes inroads into the main public sphere. Native Americans have not had a comparable subaltern public sphere. It is hard to see how public theology can uphold its purpose on the topic of wilderness without promoting the nascent, fragile, subaltern public of Native Americans. That probably involves meeting, listening to, reading, standing with, and arguing on the side of Native Americans about particular issues in their pre-US relationship to the land. For example, in the lower forty-eight states there are issues over joint management of national parks by Native Americans and the National Park Service, protection of and regained possession of ancestral burial grounds such as the Black Hills. In Wisconsin and Minnesota, disputes have arisen over privileged access to ancient hunting and fishing locales.
Additional public theological topics pertinent to Native American interests include:

1. The Creator’s primary relationship to the whole earth as a “first ownership” grounds Catholic social teaching on the universal destination of earth’s goods. In that regard public theology could also explore public implications of the natural, cosmic dimensions of liturgy.

2. Niels Henrik Gregersen’s “deep Christology” opens the Incarnation to full cosmic, planetary, and biological extension.33

3. The vaunted First Amendment protection of the free exercise of religion has not benefited Native Americans because the amendment’s eighteenth-century concept of religion excluded a diffuse, diurnal, and seasonal, sacral relation to land, water, sun, moon, stars, and cosmos. How then could the First Amendment religion clauses protect free exercise of religion in preserving ancestral burial areas or buffalo hunting?

Public Attitudes, Public Theology

Wilderness is a human construct, a way of experiencing nature that is deeply embedded in Euro-American history, identity, and political imagination. This concept of nature as wilderness, whether to be conquered, transformed, or preserved, informs public attitudes not only about land use but also about national purposes and even about which peoples are recognized and included as partners in the public conversation. Our mutual explorations confirm that an adequate public theology, one that contributes to a more liberating public life in the United States, must critically interrogate the role and function of wilderness as part of a colonial mentality that has a history of claiming to serve God while abusing land and people.

Notes

2 This argument is developed in Mary Doak, Reclaiming Narrative for Public Theology [Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004].
3 See especially the historical and literary analysis provided by David R.


Nash chronicles this history but relies too much on Lynn White Jr.'s well-known 1967 blame of biblical religion for modernity's scientific-technological exploitation of nature and consequent ecological crisis.


Ibid., 67–95.


See the Wilderness Society website at www.wilderness.org. A Wilderness designation can be placed on land in national parks, national forests, Bureau of Land Management acreage, and Fish and Wildlife Service areas. Information on protection comes from the Wilderness Society website.

See Williams, Wilderness Lost, esp. 25, 46.

Ibid., 11.

Ibid., 111. See also Nash, Wilderness and the American Mind, 69.

Williams, Wilderness Lost, 15, 252.


See especially John Sennichsen, Live! from Death Valley: Dispatches from America’s Low Point (Seattle: Sasquatch, 2005).


Mark David Spence, Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks (New York: Oxford Press, 1999), and Holly

23Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness*, 4.
24Ibid., 3.
25Ibid., 6.


