“Impressively harnessing both historical and ethnographic data, Kerry Mitchell provides a fresh take on the politics of religion-making in America. He offers a counter-narrative to scholarly celebrations of spirituality that is respectful of his subjects and acknowledges the fact that very few of us, if any, have a clear understanding of why we do what we do. Mitchell denaturalizes the concept of spirituality, showing, however, that this mode of piety is not simply made-up. On the contrary, it accomplishes an incredible amount of work in places like the John Muir Trail or Joshua Tree National Park by naturalizing the nation state and socializing the interior states of individuals. This book also generates new insight into what might be called negative aesthetics—that is, how concealment can be revelatory and how the vagueness of nature serves to connect a range of individuals by way of a shared humanity that is rather specifically defined. A must read for anyone interested in American religion in these times of late but ever pressing capitalism.”

—John Modern, Franklin & Marshall College

• Illuminates the working of the secular “on the ground” in the management of land, bodies, and sense perception.

• Brings critical balance to the understanding of religious/spiritual connections to nature.

• Offers critical, original analysis of powerful, iconic experiences.
General Summary

SUMMARY

America’s national parks are some of the most powerful, beautiful, and inspiring spots on the earth. They are often considered “spiritual” places in which one can connect to oneself and to nature. But it takes a lot of work to make nature appear natural. To maintain the apparently pristine landscapes of our parks, the National Park Service must engage in traffic management, landscape design, crowd-diffusing techniques, viewpoint construction, behavioral management, and more—and to preserve the “spiritual” experience of the park, they have to keep this labor invisible.

Spirituality and the State analyzes the way that the state manages spirituality in the parks through subtle, sophisticated, unspoken, and powerful techniques. Following the demands of a secular ethos, park officials have developed strategies that slide under the church/state barrier to facilitate deep connections between visitors and the space, connections that visitors often express as spiritual. Through indirect communication, the design of trails, roads, and vista points, and the management of land, bodies and sense perception, the state invests visitors in a certain way of experiencing reality that is perceived as natural, individual, and authentic. This construction of experience naturalizes the exercise of authority and the historical, social, and political interests that lie behind it. In this way a personal, individual, nature spirituality becomes a public religion of a particularly liberal stripe. Drawing on surveys and interviews with visitors and rangers as well as analyses of park spaces, Spirituality and the State investigates the production and reception of nature and spirituality in America’s national park system.
Summary

*Spirituality and the State* seeks to examine the connection between religion, spirituality and the state, through the lens of national parks strewn all around the United States.

From the start, the very essence of spirituality is questioned, seeing as spirituality tends to avoid a singular description. Oftentimes it is viewed in terms of religion, but *Spirituality and the State* makes the point that there is a growing group of people who consider themselves spiritual but not religious. At the same time, the book makes the point of showing how the parks, and by extension nature, represent a significant spiritual experience for those who come there.

In Joshua Tree National Park, one of the visitors identified the park as his church. In doing so he brings into focus the idea that coming into nature, away from the cities and other urban centers can be seen as a communion of sorts. Providing a way for man to connect with nature, in an age where such a connection is harder and harder to find. And yet multiple paradoxes exist within this communion, chief amongst them is the fact that the parks are not isolated from society. They are vigorously maintained by the state, are run by state officials, and require payment upon entry. In this sense, the state and the parks become interlinked.

One third of the United States is considered public, and most of it is undeveloped. In such places the state steps in. The state provides the park, and by proxy, access to nature. Visitors in turn, pay to partake in this spiritual experience, and so the state assumes to role of a facilitator.

This book explores these connections, the way in which we interact with nature, and how our experience as a society is shaped by these connections.

**Questions for discussion**

- Explore the different interpretations of spirituality. How do the different definitions clash with one another? How has the idea evolved throughout the last century, and what is the role of nature in it?

- Do the parks represent something that is lost to us in the modern age? Is the connection with nature there stronger than it is in the average forest or city park?

- Is there a class and race limitation in the parks? Consider the financial considerations of those that visit the parks, and the geographical demographics that have access to them.

- How does the state act as a steward of the parks? Is its maintenance of the parks necessary for the natural connection that they provide?
SUMMARY

In the opening chapter the evolution of the national parks in the context of the American narrative is explored. Starting with the middle of the 19th century, this chapter shows how the call for the national parks ties into the greater discussion of the essence of spirituality.

Early on John Muir called for a connection between mankind and nature. He claimed that such a private and individual connection was essential for growth and spiritual prosperity. In time his ideas were appropriated by the state. From the perspective of the state, national parks were a resource. Through them citizens could have a connection to nature, and that connection provided a transcendental escape from the relentless repetition that the average American dealt with in their day-to-day lives.

However, by taking over the connection between man and nature, the state changed the nature of that connection. It was no longer a private thing, but a force which connected people to nature and to one another. The communal element of that connection became instrumental in the evolution of national parks throughout the course of the 20th century.

As the great wars of the early 20th century raged, the argument was made for the use of the parks’ natural resources. This argument was defeated by the idea of community and its natural extension-heritage. The parks were said to represent a piece of the American narrative, something earned by the march of the ideology of manifest destiny. The advocates of heritage claimed that destroying the parks would rob future generations of something essential.

Over time it was also claimed that the bits of nature found in the parks were untouched, and thus pure. This claim bolstered a religious and spiritual narrative that the parks had to be protected for the preservation of the spirit of the United States. The various arguments melded into one another over time, leading to a period of synthesis. No one argument was responsible for the continued existence of the park, and yet they all had a part to play.

In the 1960’s many parks were added, and by then there was no singular reasoning, the parks were managed for the sake of management. Their purpose was no longer easily definable; much in the same way that spirituality defeats any singular definition.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Explore the economic, ecological, religious and national factors that went into
the erection of the national parks system. How did each factor add to the greater whole? In addition look into the historical context of each factor. Connect it to different movements and thinkers of the time.

- How does the state management of parks affect the ideas of thinkers such as John Muir?
- How does man’s connection with nature fits into the greater American narrative?
Chapter 2: The John Muir Trail: The Properties of Wilderness

SUMMARY

In this chapter, the John Muir Trail (JMT) is explored. It’s establishment and protection by the 1964-wilderness act open the chapter, and then the focus shifts over the hikers who traverse this trail. The majority of the chapter deals with the mindset of such individuals, and the ways in which the trail provides them with a spiritual experience.

The examination of the hikers is drawn from dozens of interviews, and from them several observations arise. Most of the hikers are white, well educated and relatively well off. Most do not think of themselves as religious, but plenty regard themselves as spiritual up to a certain degree.

When asked about their spirituality, the hikers often refer to the dichotomy that exists between civilization and the wilderness. While not outright rejecting the urban centers that dominate the nation, they usually agree that there is something flawed in the western perception of the world. The relentless pursuit of excess and material things is cited a primary factor in their rejection of civilization. In nature, they are stripped bare of all things that non-essential, and when they return home, the need for possessions that drives so many people seems to mystify them.

More so, the constant rush that is involved with modern life is a turn off to many hikers. The impatience involved with everyday tasks is abhorrent to them. The idea that people cannot wait for anything anymore stands in stark contrast to the slow contemplative nature of the JMT. On the trail, the constant distractions of civilization are gone, replaced by the constant task of survival, and long periods of meditative contemplation.

Many who travel upon the JMT consider the weeks traversing it as cleansing. Their minds are opened up to deeper thoughts, ones usually lost in the hustle and bustle of their normal lives. One hiker compared such thinking to going to church, in the sense that he was given something to think about.

Another spiritual element that can be gleaned from the interviews is the acceptance of nature that most of the hikers have. Their imposition of human order upon nature seems wrong to them, and more than that, they feel that it binds people. By accepting their helplessness before the might of nature, they become free and at peace with themselves.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

➥ One hiker describes a moment where the pattern of hiking was broken by a
long period of quiet observation of nature. Does the escape to nature represent the same thing to hikers? If so, how?

- Explore the different facets of trail spirituality. How is it formed? And what place does isolation play in it? How does community play into it?

- Modern life is viewed as repetitive by the hikers, but traveling the trail can be considered a repetitive experience. How do the two differ? In what ways does hiking represent a pure spiritual experience?
SUMMARY

In this chapter, the spiritual connection between park goers and the park is examined in the context of Yosemite National Park. A major theme in this chapter is the harmonious connection between the people and the park, and by extension, the state.

Tourism and financial aspect are briefly touched upon. They are mentioned in their capacity as facilitators of the park's existence. While previous chapter made the argument for the moral and ideological reasons for the preservation of national parks, this chapter makes it clear that the financial benefit, which they represent, is integral to their continued existence.

The harmony that is present in Yosemite is evident on multiple levels. It is shown in the design of the park's facilities; the manner in which they blend in with the environment and use elements of it in their design. On another level, many of the visitors in the park remark upon a general harmony present in the park itself. For them, the harmony of the park stems from the immersion in nature, and the beauty that it provides.

Spirituality comes into play through that harmony. In the previous chapters, spirituality in presented as undefined, and this chapter takes that approach a step further. Each individual that comes to the park, experiences its wonders in a different way. As a result, each person creates a unique relationship with nature, and thus, they develop their own version of spirituality. Because, as the chapter shows, there is no need to impose a strict set of rules on nature, in fact, the more rules are imposed on it, the less powerful it becomes. By accepting the unruly harmony of nature, and the basic contradiction that it presents, spirituality can flourish.

In regards to the visitors of the park, this chapter shows once more how the majority of them of Caucasian, well educated and relatively affluent. From the accounts given in this chapter, it is shown that for many of them, the park represents an open church of sorts. In it they can worship in whatever way they believe is right. Some find the harmony of the park as evidence of a higher power, some find it to simply be peaceful, and even those who do not see themselves as religious or spiritual, consider the park special and dear to their hearts.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How does the park incorporate Native American elements? How do their spiritual beliefs mesh with the undefined spirituality of the park?
What is the place of the beliefs of John Muir in the modern undefined spirituality that is present in parks like Yosemite? Would the modern connection formed be in line with his own beliefs?

Can one experience a spiritual connection outside a natural environment? Can there by urban epiphanies of the same magnitude as those found in a park?
SUMMARY

The synergy and conflict between the public and private spirituality takes center stage in this chapter. This idea is presented through the history of the Muir Woods national monument. In the beginning of the 20th century, the woods were private property, owned by William Kent. After a vicious earthquake, San Francisco was in need of a stronger infrastructure, and that meant wood. James Newlands, a local businessman, approached Kent with an offer for his property. Kent refused, and in the process of a prolonged legal battle, he used the Antiquities Act of 1906 to turn the Muir Woods into a national monument. By doing so, he shifted what was once private land into public land, protected by the state. The state became the guardian of the Muir Woods when Kent could no longer do it on his own.

This becomes relevant to the discussion of spirituality in the face of the following paradox. Many visitors who consider themselves religious view the Muir Woods as a testament to God’s ability. This is especially evident in a region of the woods called cathedral grove, which is often referred to as a church. The contradiction stems from the fact that the Muir Woods, and the entirety of the parks system are upheld by the state. In other words, the Muir Woods may look like a place God made, but it is by the will of men that they are kept that way.

This in turn connects to the general rhetoric that is used in the spiritual context. God and the state are entirely separated from one another in the park, and so the place of organized religion, and the rules that it brings, is murky. While the parks provide a very religious experience to some, most who go there enjoy the undefined spirituality that comes from a lack of strict regulations. This stems from the highly individualized experience that lends towards interpretation.

The structure and administration of Muir Woods is not meant to provide a strict understanding of the park. Instead, like many other parks, it encourages personal interpretation. Each person is meant to create their own version of spirituality in the context of the parks. Which means that while there is no official community, there is an “inter-nomadic” community. Places like cathedral grove can elicit a similar reaction from two vastly different people. Or two very different reactions from two very similar people.

This chapter also places spirituality in the hands of the state. By combining the individual experience of the visitor, and the public nature of the park, the state becomes the provider of spirituality. Where there is a void usually filled by organized religion, in the parks, the state can provide the undefined spirituality as an alternative.
QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Did William Kent go against John Muir’s beliefs when he made the Muir Wood’s into public property?

- How do places like cathedral grove create a universal spirituality? What binds so many different people together, while maintaining an individual experience?

- Explore the implications of interpretation? Where does it factor in the spiritual narrative of the park?
Chapter 5: Theorizing Religious Individualism

**SUMMARY**

In the final chapter, the relationship between the parks and the state is explored. In earlier chapters, the amorphous essence of spirituality was explored, and here, the connection between it and the state is examined once more in the context of social ideologies.

The opinions of political thinkers from both sides of the spectrum are brought up, and through them, an understanding of how the parks represent America is established. It becomes evident that a liberal ideal guides the spiritual experience of those in the park. They experience the parks as individuals, and their own growth is the benefit from their experience. However, this individualism is shown in this chapter to be connected to a republican ideal of communal identity.

The argument brought forth here, is that individualism (as fostered by the parks) gains its context through community. That is to say that the highly individual experience of the parks is actually beneficial to the larger community. This community is not the loosely connected one that exists within the parks, but the larger national community that is the American republic.

Furthermore, this communal development is encouraged by the state. It is said that in America, everyone is free to worship as they please; that there is no strict guideline under which to pursue one’s beliefs. And while that may be true, it is through the parks that the state essentially creates a loose guideline for faith and spirituality. The parks’ motto is “experience your America,” and yet there is a guiding force behind that experience.

The parks are an escape from society. They are a place free of the constant repetition of day-to-day life, and as a result, they come to symbolize something free and pure to the average American. But, that purity is only possible because of the state, and it is shaped by the state. In other words, the state takes nature and makes it into a glove. The citizens makes a connection with that glove, believing it to be entirely personal, and once that connection is made, the state can guide them in whatever way it chooses.

**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

- Compare the spiritual connection of the park to Rousseau’s “civil religion”. How are the two alike, how are they different?

- What is the end towards which the state guides spirituality? Is it a beneficial one? Is this guiding hand a liberal or conservative ideal?
Can the parks truly provide an escape? Consider the presence of the state in your answer. Take into account the various testimonies found in this chapter and prior ones.
SUMMARY

Finally, the individual reaction to the invisible spirituality of the parks is examined. By understanding that there is a guiding hand behind the spirituality of the park, the natural reaction would be resist it. But Spirituality and the State makes the argument that there is a benefit to this guiding hand. The parks were preserved in the name of growth and national identity, and while that might hijack Muir’s personal connection with nature, it is shown throughout the book that there are many benefits that stem from their existence. The freedom, which they represent, might be guided, but it is no less real and substantial. The spiritual connection that they foster can still lead to personal enlightenment and growth, even if that growth is in service of the larger national community. Spirituality and the State concludes that we ought to embrace the guiding hand, even if it is with some trepidation and critical self-awareness.