ISSN 1941-8450

Journal of Religion & Society
Supplement Series

The Kripke Center Supplement 24 (2023)

Religion, Race, and the Other

Edited by Ronald A. Simkins

6. Earthly Objects

Agriculture and Nature Religion in the Antebellum North

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Abstract

The category of "nature religion," first proposed by Catherine Albanese, drew attention to the religious work that the concept of nature has done in North America. This paper argues for the importance of nature religion in evangelical writing about agriculture during the aggressive expansion of the early and mid-nineteenth century. It argues, first, that evangelicals portrayed agriculture as redemptive: exalting human beings from economic dependency and perhaps returning the earth to an Edenic state. Second, it argues that evangelicals portrayed the extension of European-style agriculture as a way to redeem the land from "waste" and fulfil its divinely appointed purpose. Third, it argues that evangelicals read the flourishing of agriculture as a sign that the dispossession of Indigenous peoples fulfilled God's purposes, making landscapes into texts authorizing colonial expansion.

Keywords: Nature religion, agriculture, evangelicalism, colonialism, religion and ecology

Introduction

As I write this essay, unseasonably warm rains fall on Toronto, marking the end of another one of the hottest years on record (Davis 2022). It has become commonplace to remark that we now live in the Anthropocene: a geologic era shaped by human activity. It has become similarly commonplace to remark that we are now living through, or on the brink of, an environmental apocalypse. These statements underplay the role of global colonialism in catastrophic global change. First, as many critics of the term have noted, to call our era the "Anthropocene" generalizes responsibility for our environmental state to all humans rather than highlighting the economic and political structures that have disproportionately harmed the environment (Haraway 2016, 30–54; Sharp 2020). Second, to speak of a dawning environmental apocalypse is to ignore how one of those structures, European settler colonialism, has already brought multiple apocalypses to the land from which I write. The land under my apartment was once black oak savannah: an open landscape of widely spaced trees and low underbrush. It provided game, medicinal plants, and crops to Indigenous peoples such as the Mississauga and the Haudenosaunee, who managed it through controlled burns and traditional harvesting practices (Johnson 2020; Keller 2017; Dinh, Hewitt, and Drezner 2015). These savannahs, and other managed environments like them, were the basis for Indigenous worlds. Settlers transformed those environments and sought to destroy Indigenous nations on a scale that deserves to be called apocalyptic. As Kim TallBear (Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate), Kyle Whyte (Citizen Potawatomi Nation), and other Indigenous scholars have noted, apocalypses have already arrived in North America. They simply have not been evenly distributed (Whyte 2018; TallBear 2020).

The roots for any situation this complex are many. This essay examines one entangment of colonialism and environmental destruction without claiming it as an origin point or sole cause of the current multiplying crises. It argues that northern evangelicals in the early American republic found religious meaning in one specific way of relating to the land: freehold farming.[1] Understanding their approach to agriculture brings into relief the seemingly contradictory contours of the cultures of nature that emerged in the nineteenth century. On the one hand, White settlers participated in an economy based on the appropriation and plunder of Indigenous lands, which caused widespread environmental damage (Sachs 2010; Witgen 2022). On the other, a new mode of reverence for nature emerged among those same settlers during this period. The revolutionary generation had grounded their politics in the twin ideas that, first, "nature" designated a world apart from human influence and, second, that the observation of nature allowed humans to deduce so-called natural rights and natural laws. The following generations found resources for religion, as well as politics, in what they regarded as nature. In her foundational work on the subject, Catherine Albanese called this tendency "nature religion." For her, the term denoted how Americans used symbols drawn from nature to orient themselves toward what they perceived to be the ordinary and extraordinary powers

[1] The meanings of the word "evangelical" are many, the debates over its boundaries interminable. Here I discuss just one of the groups called "evangelical" in histories of the early United States: northern Protestants belonging to churches that emphasized the need for Christians to invest in both personal and social reform. These included the more pro-revival Presbyterian and Congregationalist churches to which the authors of the sources discussed here all belonged (Bebbington 1989; Noll 2003; Howe 2007).

around them. This tendency was most obvious among those, such as Transcendentalists, who deemphasized Protestant orthodoxies in favor of what they saw as natural principles. A similar concern, however, animated the lives of evangelicals who insisted on those orthodoxies. For evangelicals, nature was powerful and sacred insofar as it disclosed the will of God (Albanese 1990, 6–15; Taylor 2005; Stoll 2007; Grainger 2019, 5–10).

Work on nature religion in the nineteenth century United States has focused on settlers' reverence for lands that they saw as wild or untouched by humans. Nineteenth-century subjects located the force of nature in such lands precisely because they regarded nature as something that existed apart from human culture. Some scholars, such as Bron Taylor (2009), have explicitly focused their studies on reverence for nature apart from humanity. More often, however, historians of American religion have simply assumed that their nineteenth-century subjects' ideas about nature appeared only or mainly in their thoughts about the wild (Friesner 2017). Even Albanese's work on themes of mastery and violence in early republican nature religion focused on the domination of what settlers perceived to be wilderness (1990, 58–79). But settlers' most common interactions with plants, animals, and the land occurred in agriculture, where humans' transformation of the environment was obvious. Agricultural landscapes, as well as supposed wilderness ones, were powerful religious resources for White settlers. Leaving these tendencies out of consideration risks obscuring how settlers connected their reverence for the natural world with their belief that God approved of their conquest and appropriation of Indigenous lands.

This essay studies one genre of evangelical writing about agricultural landscapes: sermons for days of thanksgiving such as civic anniversaries or harvest festivals. Such sermons resembled evangelicals' writing about wilderness environments in that they assumed that nature disclosed God's purposes and presence (Grainger 2019, 1–10). They depicted the land as alive with the spirit of a God who willed the flourishing of both individual settler families and the United States. They described the massive environmental changes which settlers brought to environments managed by Indigenous people as outgrowths of that spirit, guided more by the laws of nature's God than by political decisions. In a loose but widely shared natural theology drawing on the "reasonable Christianity" of John Locke (1632–1704), they argued that the true purpose of the North American environment was to be occupied and used for the maintenance of freehold farms. When American farms flourished and crops grew abundantly, they read this as the natural environment communicating God's approval for the extension of American colonialism. In this way, White evangelicals authorized the apocalyptic transformation of North American environments from ones that supported Indigenous peoples into ones that supported settlers.

The Political Economy of the Thanksgiving Sermon

Thanksgiving sermons constructed an implicit theology out of references to agrarian virtue that were part of larger political debates in the early United States and of the English pastoral tradition in literature (Sweet 2002, 1–11, 97–121; Pawley 2020). They depicted farming as the way of making a living most congruent with God's plan for nature. Eliding both the punishing labor of agriculture and the uncertainty of farming for the market, they framed the success of crops and the prosperity of farming families as the natural result of cultivating the land as God intended.

The Presbyterian minister, and president of Miami University in Ohio, Robert Hamilton Bishop (1777–1855) argued in an 1837 thanksgiving sermon that the Bible disclosed a system of political economy, that is, of economics. It "presents in every page, the very objects upon which the hearts and the plans of worldly men are continually set; and directs them how to acquire and enjoy them. They are all the good things of this life. Fruitful fields, thriving stock of every kind, numerous and healthy children." The richness and frequency of pastoral language in the Bible meant that God regarded the pursuit of economic independence through farming as virtuous. It was not a distraction from Christianity, but an organic part of it. "[The Bible] encourages us, and commands us, to bring these earthly objects and make them the subject of our meditation in the house of God,—and even at the communion table, and connect them with all our devotions…" (1838, 9–10) It was virtuous, therefore, for Christians to consider carefully how to "acquire and enjoy" the agricultural riches and large family described as the rewards of a just life in the Bible. Far from a profane matter to be banished from the church, consideration of "earthly objects" was appropriate "even at the communion table" at which, in Presbyterian understandings, worshippers' souls grew closest to God (Schmidt 2001, 158–68).

In Bishop's reading, the interrelationship of human beings and nature through agriculture was part of God's plan for redemption: ". . . the plan of salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, revealed only in the Bible proposes to deliver man and this earth and all its productions, from the curse—and to restore man and all that belongs to the earth, to their original state of purity and fulness and happiness." It was more typical for Protestant pastors in this period to focus their discussion of the "plan of salvation" on the spiritual liberation of humans from sin. Here, however, Bishop seems to say that the political economy of the Bible revealed that humanity could redeem the natural world. For him, that "plan of salvation . . . proposes to deliver man and this earth and all its productions from the curse." Here, he references the curse of God upon Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:16–19, which many of Bishop's contemporaries would have understood, following John Calvin, to include not only the need to work and suffer in childbirth but also "natural evils" such as famine, flood, and disease. Human sin, in this understanding, polluted the original purity of God's creation (Santmire and Cobb, Jr. 2006, 121–23). For Bishop, Christians following God's plan for disciplined agricultural work could restore the earth to its "original state of purity and fulness and happiness": a sinless and abundant Eden. Unlike most of his contemporaries, Bishop did not defer this restoration to an eschatological future, when a "new heaven and a new earth" would appear after "the first heaven and the first earth were passed away" (Rev. 21:1). Instead, he argued that it would emerge in due course from the work of nurturing "fruitful fields, thriving stock of every kind," and "numerous and healthy children." Bringing the "earthly objects" of farming into Christian worship only furthered God's "plan of salvation" (Bishop 1838, 9–10). Farming, therefore, provided a way for ordinary evangelicals to redeem the fallen nature around them.

Bishop's political economy of the Bible had important structural similarities to nature religion as Albanese describes it. Like hydropathic healers, followers of Sylvester Graham, and other believers in the natural healing methods that thrived in the early United States, Bishop argued that human thriving came from harmony with nature. Where these healers sought to put right patients' bodies and minds by restoring their natural balance, Bishop imagined

farmers healing both their want for the "good things of life" and the "curse" upon nature itself by pursuing a way of living that was in line with nature (Albanese 1990, 117–52).

Albanese (1990, 63–70) describes how Thomas Jefferson and other seekers of the sublime in the American landscape saw the evident grandeur of the natural world as a sign of America's greatness. Evangelical thanksgiving sermons, similarly, located national greatness in agricultural landscapes. Horace Eaton (1810–1883), the pastor of the Sixth Street Presbyterian Church in New York City, echoed many of Bishop's themes in an 1848 thanksgiving sermon which argued that the Bible provided a model for land tenure that nurtured a free society. "The Bible," Eaton claimed, "regulates our social state. The law of Moses made provision for permanent and virtuous families. It gave to each a portion of the old land [of Canaan] which was first distributed among the tribes. Then every individual Hebrew received sixteen to twenty-five acres as his portion. Thus every tiller of the soil was the owner of the soil." As an "owner of the soil," each male Israelite would be a head of household free of political or economic coercion. "Under his own vine and fig-tree he dwelt unmolested by the dictation of lords temporal or lords spiritual. No money speculator threw his claims over a large portion of the holy land, giving to a numerous tenantry 'only leave to toil . . .'" (H. Eaton 1848, 18–19). For Eaton's audience, the phrase "owner of the soil" was not incidental: it implied the fee-simple system of land tenure used in the United States as opposed to the tenant farming common in Europe. Although Numbers 26 does describe an ideal allotment of land to individual Israelite men, Eaton misread the text badly in imagining fee-simple ownership. In contrast to White American men, whose land rights included the right to re-sell their land, Israelites could not permanently sell land. Any land they sold would revert to the family of its original owners in each jubilee year (Lev 25:10, 24–29). A more extensive reading of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, moreover, would have indicated that tenant farming existed in some times and places in Palestine (Kloppenborg 2008).

Eaton was less interested in the accuracy of his picture of land tenure in the Bible than in the idea that the Bible endorsed the individual ownership of land that he saw as the foundation of the political system of the United States. Because the Bible, in Eaton's reading, argued for individual land tenancy, it "holds every man responsible to God for himself. He is not a mere appendance to a landlord or priest. The Bible levels up, makes individuals, begets contempt of human authority, when not endorsed by divine command. Free men grow up in Bible families. Such were the basis of our civil institutions. They are the roots of the tree of liberty, struck deep amidst the fastness of the word of God, and from thence deriving their strength and fatness" (H. Eaton 1848, 18–19). When owned outright and farmed, the land of North America bestowed the economic independence that is possible for settlers to be "free men:" free both from the "landlord" who represented economic dependence and the "priest" who, with an anti-Catholicism typical of Protestants at the time, represented religious dependence. This freedom was natural in the sense that it was part of God's original intention for all humans. Indeed, Eaton's main critique of American slavery was that it denied Black men the right to own land: "[How] should the cheek of every American crimson with shame," Eaton exclaimed, "that there are among us three millions not only robbed of the soil, but robbed of themselves, and every family tie violated!" (H. Eaton 1848, 19). Without ownership of the soil as well as of themselves, Eaton implied, enslaved Black people could not hope to construct the "permanent and virtuous" families that nurtured a free, Christian society. Slavery,

therefore, not only violated the natural liberty granted to human beings, but God's design that the physical environment of America should support individual economic independence.

As historian Brett Grainger (2019, 19–60) shows, evangelicals like Eaton often saw God's purposes in the natural world around them. They embraced admiration of nature as a "tolerable idolatry" which directed humans' minds to the creator of nature. Eaton's text demonstrates how evangelicals' understandings of nature also allowed them to frame specific ways of making a living as particularly congruent with the divine plan. For Eaton, an enlightened mind could not but see the hand of God in the provision of so much good land for farming in North America. "Think of the extent of this land, of the variety of climate and soil, and the consequent variety of production. . . . But it is not in variety that we excel, more than in the abundance," which prevented the famines of Europe. The laboring classes, far from living in want, enjoyed a constant provision of food: "The husbandman labors upon his own soil, and lives upon the finest of the wheat and the fattest of the stall" (H. Eaton 1848, 11–12). The land itself, in this reading, demonstrated God's will not just that Christians should occupy it but that they should divide it into privately owned plots so that the farmer could derive a living from "his own soil." All this, Eaton argued, was as God intended it to be. The physical geography of North America—its mountains, rivers, and coasts no less than its agricultural land—was proof of that. The lack of famines in the United States, furthermore, proved that freehold farming was more natural, and therefore more in line with God's purposes, than European tenant farming. Although Eaton does not consider Indigenous land tenure systems based on the communal ownership of land, his text leaves little doubt that he would have condemned them as similarly unnatural and unprofitable.

The belief that small farms nurtured political and economic independence was a ground assumption among White settlers in the northeast as early as the late eighteenth century (Vickers 1990). Eaton's sermon demonstrates that this idea remained central to evangelical visions of nature even as farming became a less obvious route to prosperity. Whereas 90 percent of employed men in the United States worked in agriculture in 1790, by 1850 only 50 percent did (Statistical Reporting Service 1969, 1; Hacker 2010, 49). The size of farms that Eaton names as the Israelite ideal—sixteen to twenty-five acres—was entirely out of step with changing realities in the United States. As of the 1850 census, only about one in five farms in the north were smaller than fifty acres, and nearly half were over one hundred acres (DeBow 1854, 175).[2] Indeed, Eaton's congregation likely contained more "money speculators" than it did "tillers of the soil." One leading member, William E. Dodge (1805–1883), would later own a land company that operated in Georgia (A. Eaton 1885, 55–57; Cooksey 2018). Eaton did not, therefore, dwell on pastoral imagery because farming was an important occupation among his congregants. Instead, for him farming was a synecdoche for the pursuit of economic and political freedom in accordance with God's design of the world.

Northern evangelicals, then, argued that God had designed nature to support freehold agriculture as the basis of the United States. They portrayed economic prosperity as emerging naturally from farming, as nature responded to human labor with abundance. When

[2] Because of limitations to the 1850 census, the only northern states in which census-takers recorded the size of farms were Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Rhode Island.

evangelicals paused in thanksgiving celebrations, their readings of the Hebrew Bible led them back again and again to the idea that agricultural success was the main way that God's favor appeared in nature. Some parts of these sermons sound less religious because they make arguments in line with what White Americans in the early United States took to be rational economic policy. But we need not accept our historical subjects' accounts of their own rationality. Characterizing European plow agriculture as solely based in rationalized management is to surrender to a problem of our own making: the organization of different activities of human life into the secular and the religious that requires us to ignore, vilify, or surrender those activities and concepts along the boundary. Fully considered, farming spans these artificially purified categories (Latour 1993).

Nature Religion and Colonial Possession

Evangelical rhetoric about agriculture accomplished on the scale of individual farms and towns what the concept of "manifest destiny" did on a national scale. Manifest destiny, although often unhelpfully extended to include all religious rhetoric in favor of expansion in the early United States, was in fact a specific response to the deployment of Christian theology in international law. The Doctrine of Discovery and the concept of *terra nullius* justified settlers' occupation of North America by arguing that Indigenous peoples could not own land. All sovereignty over the earth ultimately came from the Christian God, who had delegated it to Christian nations. Hence, whichever Christian nation first laid claim to a territory had the right to the entire watershed (Miller 2015). The journalist John O'Sullivan (1813–1895) created the phrase "manifest destiny" to oppose this concept and replace it with a different logic of conquest and settlement. Since the United States did not have title to either Texas or Oregon according to the Doctrine of Discovery, O'Sullivan proclaimed, it must instead claim these territories because God had made its right to them "manifest"—meaning obvious—in the land itself (Dougherty 2021, 146–47).

Thanksgiving sermons helped to unite national visions of chosen-ness with the work of individual farmers and towns to transform the land. They functioned in part because they were predictable. That is, their audiences seem to have appreciated how they rehearsed the same tropes: the goodness of God in providing the land of North America and how settlers had transformed that land during past years. They were meant to soothe and even bore the audience. In this, they resembled the evangelical society meetings that the historian Dana Logan describes. Such meetings, Logan argues (2022, 49–73), demonstrated the unity of evangelical benevolent societies by requiring audiences to listen, passively and with properly attentive comportment, to tediously long speeches and resolutions. The consensus they demonstrated through their presence as good audiences helped to resolve a contradiction between the egalitarian appeals that evangelicals made to each human's heart and the tendency of northern evangelicals to argue that the nation needed the leadership of a moral elite. In the tedium of meetings, evangelical societies became one body. Thanksgiving sermons, similarly, helped to unite the local histories of individual farmers, congregations, and towns with the more general justificatory arguments of *terra nullius* and manifest destiny. They did this primarily by arguing that the supposed natural laws which made Indigenous dispossession necessary appeared in ordinary landscapes. Evangelicals might seek out solitary groves or

sublime mountains to feel the overwhelming glory of God, but they also read the farms and towns around them as quietly demonstrating divine approval of White settlement.

The Congregational minister Ephraim T. Woodruff (1777–1859) extolled the transformation that White settlement had brought to the fervently evangelical region of northeastern Ohio by 1826. In a sentence whose syntax was mangled by printer's errors, he encouraged the audience to number among their blessings from God "the unprecedented increase of the population of our country, the conversion of the wilderness their beauty and splendor, in desert places so lately the [sic] into fruitful fields, the rising of villages and cities in haunts of wild beasts and of savage men, and the erection of temples for the worship of the true God, of colleges, of academies and schools of learning in so many parts of the land!!" (1826, 11–12). Although the state of the only surviving copy of this passage raises doubts about its meaning, "the conversion of the wilderness their beauty and splendor" seems to be parenthetical describing "the population of our country." If so, then Woodruff is claiming that the "beauty and splendor" of settlers is their "conversion of the wilderness," which he goes on to describe as the replacement of "desert places" with "fruitful fields" and of "haunts of wild beasts and of savage men" with "villages and cities." Such rhetorical contrasts were a mainstay of thanksgiving sermons. Compare, for example, a sermon delivered by the Presbyterian pastor William M. Hoyt (1813–1844) in nearby Ellsworth, Ohio, which thanked God that "Prosperity has attended us, and where but a few years since, the panther, wolf and bear sought their prey unmolested, only as they were now and then startled by the wandering red man, we now behold villages and cities, with their state houses, and temples dedicated to the worship of the living God, raising their lofty spires above the horizon" (1842; Matulek 2019). The tropes used in sermons of this kind are remarkable for how unremarkable they were. The contrast between an unpopulated or "desert" landscape full of animals and Indigenous people—who somehow do not count as inhabiting or managing the land—and a prosperous, Christian landscape dotted with church spires would have been familiar to Woodruff's and Hoyt's audiences from countless textbooks, stories, local histories, and newspaper articles (Stevens 2004; O'Brien 2010). By revisiting these worn ideas, the sermons conveyed the comforting, if dull, sense that all was as it should be. The landscape was changing according to the natural order of things.

These sermons contained a clear theology of conquest and possession that their conventional structure enhanced rather than detracted from. They argued that the landscape around their audiences revealed that God approved of the United States' expansion. Because of God's favor for the nation, Woodruff argued, "the seasons of the year have rolled on uninterruptedly according to divine appointment," bringing their blessings to agriculture such that "This land has never seen a famine" (1826, 11–12). Woodruff, like other evangelicals writing about agriculture, saw God's hand not only in examples of the sublime or in spaces they read as "wilderness," but assumed that the constant action of the creator sustained agriculture in quiet but important ways. Processes that others might see as nature acting in its own course—the seasons following each other, the presence of fertile soil in the United States—were in fact signs of God's action through nature. The conversion of "wilderness" inhabited by "wild beasts" and "savage men" into "fruitful fields" and "villages and cities" was, similarly, a sign that God's natural laws were operating as they should.

Woodruff narrated the arrival of settlers as an expression of God's spiritual favor rather than a material process. But his congregation was surrounded by evidence of the violent acts that made their settlements possible. They lived in territory that thirty years earlier had been at the forefront of the Northwest Indian War (1786–1795), a conflict that arose from the United States' attempts to claim the rich agricultural lands northwest of the Ohio. Members of the Miami, Shawnee, Lenape, Odawa, and other nations fought back, and the resulting conflict was both the first of what Americans subsequently called the "Indian Wars" and one of the costliest to the United States military (Grenier 2005; Calloway 2015). This history was not far from public memory when Woodruff preached his sermon. He delivered it, the printed text of the sermon notes, in "a log building, erected on a spot where the Indians, but a few years since, held their POW-POWS" (1826, 5). Although settlers might call any kind of Indigenous meeting or ceremony a "powwow" or "pow-pow"—and indeed frequently used the term for their own political gatherings—it often described Indigenous councils of war or ceremonies in which prisoners of war were executed. Hence, the association of this specific spot with the Northwest Indian War and other conflicts was close to the surface. Woodruff's pastoral depiction of the seasons rolling on in their appointed courses and the crops flourishing under settlers' cultivation, as well as his depiction of westward settlement as the passive "increase of our population," erased a recent, violent history that he might have been expected to remember.

Northern evangelicals knew that the lands settlers farmed had recently been Indigenous territories. Their thanksgiving sermons acknowledged this idea by, first, associating Indigenous people with "wild" rather than managed lands and, second, by portraying the transformation of those lands into landscapes of White settlement as a part of God's will for nature. At the center of both rhetorical moves was the theological idea that God intended that wild lands should be made productive. Although these sermons portrayed this idea as a result of their readings of the Bible, it came, of course, from John Locke's theory of property. In his *Second Treatise of Government* (1689), Locke articulated this theory as part of his attempt to construct a political system based on a fundamental harmony between God's natural laws and the interests of individual humans. Locke argued that God had given the earth to humanity, and that everyone had the right to appropriate and benefit from parts of the earth. The main limitations on this accumulation were that they should leave sufficient property for others and not accumulate more than they could use. Resources, and especially land, that remained unexploited for economic purposes became "waste" in Locke's language. Waste was morally opprobrious in part because it violated God's command to make use of the earth, which revealed that the divinely ordained purpose of humanity was to labor and provide for their own needs. The resources of the earth, in turn, existed to be used in labor. Locke argued that this system was moral in part because resources appropriated for labor would, in turn, produce more for others (Ince 2011, 25–41).

Locke's principles of political economy were standard reading for ministers trained in colleges (Lynn 1981). However, they made their way into more informal training as well. Joseph Patterson (1752–1832), for example, encountered Locke's concepts if not his name during his apprenticeship with the revivalist Joseph "Hell Fire" Smith (1736–1792). In a 1786 ethics notebook, Patterson wrote: "[Question] 39. How does Land become any ones property? A. By first securing and cultivating it. 40. Can one justly secure for himself all that lies

common? A. No, only as much as he can cultivate in any reasonable time" (1783, 34–35). From the wider context of this ethical catechism, it is clear that Smith was training his pupils to be local ethical and moral authorities, able to give an answer to dilemmas ranging from lost articles to declaring war. That Locke's concepts appear in this curriculum without any further discussion indicates both the power they had for evangelical thought about land and that a minister might be called on to defend the justness of White settlers' conquest of Indigenous territories.

The idea of waste land deployed in these sermons assumed that only European-style plow agriculture used land in a justifiable way. Almost all Indigenous nations, however, practiced agriculture for centuries by the time Europeans arrived. In the eastern part of the continent, the productivity of Indigenous peoples' fields often astonished European observers. The forests around the fields, too, were managed. Indigenous peoples used controlled burns and careful harvesting practices to ensure steady supplies of game animals and useful plants (Cronon 2003; Richter 2011, 32–36; Calloway 2013, 9–24; Greer 2012). When the United States appropriated Indigenous territories and sold them to settlers, therefore, farmers inherited not a primeval wilderness but a mosaic of managed lands. The natural relationship between land holding, farming, and economic independence, in turn, concealed the massive transfer of economic resources from Indigenous peoples to settlers. This plunder directly supported freehold farming, as the government appropriated Indigenous territories and sold them on the market as freehold farms.

Agriculture, therefore, took a central place in evangelical arguments that portrayed colonialism in North America as the result of natural processes God had designed rather than conquest. Minsters like Woodruff trained their audiences, first, to see the flourishing of fields and farms as natural works of God rather than the result of massive effort and, second, to read that flourishing as a sign that nature responded to White settlement in accordance with the creator's laws. This view of a vital nature filled with God's purposes, though a cause for contented reflection for White settlers in Ashtabula County, became in the mid-century one dominant language justifying further conquest and dispossession of Indigenous people.

Conclusion

For northern evangelicals in the antebellum period, agriculture was a site of revelation. The flourishing of fields and the transformation of the landscape both disclosed the will of God in a nature that they assumed to be divinely designed. Locke's categories of use and waste were, for them, axiomatic. Blending these with a vision of farming based on both Romantic nostalgia and the prominence of agriculture in the Bible, they proposed that God intended the land of North America to be used for freehold farming. Even for those who worked in other industries, farming became a symbol of the natural virtue and beauty that resulted from transforming the land of North America in accordance with God's purposes. This approach to land, finally, authorized the dispossession of Indigenous people on a more intimate scale than the more familiar rhetoric of the Doctrine of Discovery or manifest destiny. Viewed through evangelical discourses about farming, every field of what became its own evidence of the rightness of White occupation.

This rhetoric was intentionally boring. Aiming to calm more than excite, it re-stated ideas that White settlers held without examination. Naturalness, here, emerges not as wonder at the

beauties of the world but as assent to specific kinds of economic transformations, and specific relationships to the land. It emerges also as a specific relationship toward race. Evangelical pastoral rhetoric passed smoothly over the dispossession of Indigenous peoples. When they, or enslaved Black people, appear in these sermons, it is as the brief mentions of imperfections in a human system that remind us we are not yet in paradise. They have the cadence of acknowledgements that the poor are always with us, rather than of Abolitionists' calls to action.

What is to be gained by classifying this rhetoric as nature religion? First, doing so revives a line of argument in Albanese's work which argued that symbolic reference to nature could just as easily reinforce relationships of domination as offer an escape from them (1990, 12, 70–79). Second, doing so attends to the importance that nineteenth-century Protestants attached to agriculture as a part of the natural world without taking their rationales for agricultural expansion as a given. Finally, it reminds us that the histories of religion and nature are never too far from economic histories. The use of the environment in settler economies was, undoubtedly, largely destructive (Sachs 2010). That settlers used the land as a means to an end does not, however, mean that they found nothing sacred there. Rather, they found God's will revealed in the very process of the land's transformation. It is difficult to hold in tension the idea that settlers modified and commodified their environment with the idea that they simultaneously saw it as a site of religious meaning. In the case of farming, however, that is precisely what they did.

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