Consecration and Conservation; Walden Pond as a Sacred Site

Page, Torvis
Boston Theological Institute

http://hdl.handle.net/2144/4009

Boston University
This essay explores the dynamic interplay between religion, science, and the environment by focusing on Henry David Thoreau's consecration of Walden Pond and the subsequent history of the site's conservation as a natural and cultural shrine. The author suggests that consecrated natural sites such as Walden enable us to get beyond the overdrawn dichotomies of nature/culture, sacred/mundane, and inherent/ascripted and provide fresh insights for the study of religion and ecology.

The developing religion-and-ecology movement is one of the more exciting and timely examples of multidisciplinary dialogue about pressing social and environmental issues. With this essay, I aim to contribute to this dialogue by examining the intersections of religion and ecology in the particular case of Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts. Considering Henry David Thoreau's scientific and literary consecration of the pond in the mid-nineteenth century and the subsequent maintenance of Walden as a sacred site or historic shrine raises important questions concerning the relationship between religion and the environment. Can a particular site be demarcated as sacred for ecological purposes? If so, is its sacredness ascribed or inherent? What are the relative ecological implications of consecrating a place? And what, if anything, does this particular case study teach about alternative understandings of science, religion, and the environment that might aid in addressing today's social and ecological crises?

Thoreau's Experiment

Thoreau was deeply engaged with both science and metaphysics, and his writings demonstrate his commitment to natural history, the emerging natural sciences and his own "material faith." Combined, these interests culminated in Thoreau's endorsement of what he called "con-science," a form of "moral knowledge." In his attempts to answer metaphysical questions about the nature of life and reality, Thoreau turned to a thorough and scientific— in the mid-nineteenth century understanding of the term—interrogation of the world based on his experiences. As a careful observer and recorder of both nature and culture, a professional land surveyor, and a dedicated recorder of his observations in his journals and other writings, Thoreau was a "conscientious" experimentalist. He approached his subject (life, reality, nature, the world) as a participant-observer, whose moral convictions and poetic license were assets that authenticated his interpretations and conclusions, not shortcomings that undermined them. Thus it was as a socially engaged man of both science and letters—as a writer, surveyor, scientist and metaphysician—that Thoreau conducted his two year experiment at Walden pond between 1845 and 1847 and reworked his journal recordings until finally publishing them in Walden (1854).

As presented in this text, Thoreau's motivation for conducting his experiment at Walden is moral and humanitarian as well as...
scientific and spiritual. As would any properly-trained experimental scientist of his day, Thoreau begins by identifying a problem: namely, the materialistic values driving New England culture, represented specifically by his neighbors in Concord, to whom he addresses his opening sermon on “Economy.” His objective is to “front only the essential facts of life.” “to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms” in order to “know [its essence] by experience” and “publish it...to the world.” Thoreau hopes to liberate his neighbors from the “shams and delusions” that hem them into “mean lives” of “superfluous and evitable wretchedness.” by ferreting out—through deliberate and engaged observation of the physical world—that which is “true,” “sublime,” and “eternal.” Only by attending to the concrete world of “now and here” is truth revealed, reality apprehended, and salvation possible. For Thoreau, solving the problem of capitalist materialism is a scientific and spiritual undertaking that demands a critical and engaged examination of both nature and culture.

Thoreau’s retreat to Walden was not only an experiment, however. While Thoreau himself may not have deemed it as such, his Walden project (i.e., his two-year residence at the pond and his literary representation of it) was also a consecration. By taking into account the effects of Thoreau’s project over the course of the last century and a half, one can see how his project was both a deliberate counter-cultural experiment and an effective demarcation of Walden as a sacred site. While the ideas Thoreau formulated during and after his experience have earned him national and worldwide fame, the pond attained new status through his concrete actions. Thoreau’s painstaking construction of Walden, the text, effectively consecrated its namesake. This consecration yields rich insights for the religion-and-ecology movement, for the ecological implications of demarcating sacred sites through scientific, literary, and religious means remain largely unexplored. Examined together, Thoreau’s Walden project and its long-term impact demonstrate how a particular place comes to be recognized as sacred and the implications of this process for the environment. Thoreau’s demarcation of Walden as a sacred site shaped not only the way in which subsequent generations have perceived and treated the pond and its surroundings, but also the way it has been physically and figuratively reconstructed over time.

When Thoreau “took his seat” on the shores of Walden pond, he was essentially squatting on a parcel of property that belonged to Emerson. The pond was certainly not the national shrine it has since become. How did Thoreau effect such a transformation? Most obviously, by his literary representation of it as sacred. By describing both the extraordinary purity of the pond and the revelation, restoration and rebirth that he both witnessed and attained there, Thoreau depicts Walden as a spiritually potent “sacred center.” to use Mircea Eliade’s influential motif. In the central chapter of Walden, Thoreau describes the pond as “a perennial spring,” a “distiller of celestial dews,” and “the earth’s eye.” As “God’s Drop,” Walden is unrivaled in its purity, and its sacred character is emphasized by its eternal, mythic qualities.

Perhaps on that spring morning when Adam and Eve were driven out of Eden Walden Pond was already in existence. The book’s penultimate chapter, “Spring,” emphasizes the sacred qualities of Walden by depicting Thoreau’s experience of spiritual and physical rejuvenation. Here Thoreau dramatically describes the natural, yet miracu-

126 The Journal of Faith and Science Exchange, 2001
lous, process by which the world is cyclically recreated and innocence is annually restored. Thoreau's literary representation of spring effectively collapses sacred and mundane time such that the cycle of the seasons takes on cosmological significance and Thoreau witnesses and bears testimony to what Eliade might call a hierophany, i.e., a manifestation of the sacred that simultaneously reveals the real, founds a world, and consecrates a particular place in space.8

In addition to his literary representations of the pond as a sacred center, Thoreau demarcates Walden as a sacred place when he literally and figuratively maps it in four different ways:

- **Scientifically**, by sounding and charting the pond, surveying its surroundings, and observing and recording its natural features and history;

- **Narratively**, by representing the pond as a sacred center and describing trees that stand “like temples” and serve as “shrines”;9

- **Physically**, by marking the site through the construction of edifices (i.e., his hut) and other topographical alterations (such as clearing and cultivating); and

- **Ritually**, by commemorating physical features and consecrating mundane objects and activities through mythic and ritual performance. These activities set Walden apart, much as a religious ritual makes a particular time and place sacred.

In the brief scope of this paper, these various means of demarcating Walden as sacred cannot be explored in depth. However, Thoreau’s consecration of Walden Pond, as I am depicting it here, was a deliberate and constructive process of various means of demarcation, it should not be understood simply as an ascription of sacredness to an otherwise ordinary or profane site. By marking, mapping, representing, and ritually attending to Walden Pond and its immediate surroundings, Thoreau drew attention to a particular place as sacred. This does not necessarily mean, however, that the pond and its surrounding woods were not already sacred; it simply means that they were not recognized as such. What his process of consecration shows is that sanctity—or ‘value’—is not necessarily either inherent or ascribed, but might best be understood as a combination of both. Thoreau’s “con-scientious” experiment and his consecration of Walden demonstrate not that humans confer sanctity arbitrarily onto mundane places, entities, or activities, but rather that, when these are not adequately attended to with reverence and respect, they are effectively desecrated.

Thoreau’s Walden project illustrates that regardless of whether or to what extent sanctity is natural or cultural, inherent or ascribed, it is clearly the case that inattentiveness to sanctity in the material, natural world is destructive in effect. “Nature has no human inhabitant who appreciates her,” he scolded: “Talk of heaven! Ye disgrace earth.” 11 It is this recognition that led Thoreau (and subsequent generations of Thoreauvians as well), to associate deforestation with desecration and, by extension, conservation with consecration.

**Protecting Walden: The Implications of Consecration**

Whether or not Thoreau intended to consecrate Walden, he did so in effect. This is borne out by the way that subsequent generations have perceived and maintained Walden as a sacred site. Of the approximately 600,000
people that currently visit Walden each year, it would be extremely difficult to differenti- 
ate between recreationalists, tourists, and pilgrims. Surely, not everyone who visits 
Walden Pond State Reservation today is a devotee of Thoreau or has even read Walden, 
by now a canonized classic of American lit- 
erature and virtually a bible for many envi-
ronmentalists. Nonetheless, all visitors are 
fluenced by and indebted to Thoreau, whether they re-
alize it or not, for without 
his various demarcations, 
Walden Pond State Reserva-
tion, which consists of 411 
acres of protected and ac-
cessible open space, would 
not exist. Instead, the pond 
and its surrounding woods 
would be practically un-
known and relatively insignificant. As pri-
ivate property, Walden would be familiar to a 
select few. Moreover, instead of being an in-
tegral 'place' or 'site' consisting of both the 
pond and its surrounding woods, Walden 
likely would be divided up into parcels, dis-
sected by fences, dotted with houses, cleared, 
paved, and jealously guarded by signs read-
ning "Keep Out," "Private Property," and 
"Trespassers will be Prosecuted." 

What makes Walden a particularly inter-
esting case study for examining the ecologi-
cal implications of demarcating specific topo-
ographical features or natural places as sacred is the relationship between consecration and conservation that is borne out by the history of Walden’s development as a public site.Over the course of the twentieth century, as Walden’s status as an important natural, his-
torical, and sacred site grew, so did popular movements to protect it from development and from human-induced alterations. The gradual shift away from the philosophy of preserva-
tion, which sought to maintain Walden in its original or pristine form, and toward the phi-
losophy of ecological stewardship, which seeks to maintain a balance between humans and nature, reflects developments within the environmental and conservation movements rounding Woods were no more pristine dur-
ing Thoreau’s lifetime than they are today. The history of the development and manage-
ment of Walden as public and private land since Thoreau’s experiment reveals that hu-
man interaction with the pond and its sur-
rounding woods have shaped the site both conceptually and physically. 

Since the construction of an excursion park 
at Ice Fort Cove in 1866, Walden has been a 
popular destination point for recreation-seek-
ers. Although the park burned down in 1902 
and was never rebuilt, the pond continued to 
draw visitors by train and, increasingly, auto-
mobile. Beginning in 1922, when the 
Emerson, Forbes, and Heywood families gave 
80 acres of land surrounding the pond to the 
Commonwealth of Massachusetts, the envi-
ronmental effects of Thoreau’s consecration become increasingly clear. Given to the Com-
monwealth for the purpose of "preserving the Walden of Emerson and Thoreau, its shores 
and nearby woodlands for the public who wish to enjoy the pond, the woods and nature," the parcel was then transferred to Middlesex County for oversight and maintenance. The stipulation that "the Walden of Emerson and Thoreau" be preserved in its original or natu-
ral condition (despite such radical alterations

Developments within the American environmentalist movement led to a gradual shift in emphasis from the rhetoric of "preservation" to the more recent model of "stewardship" and ecological "management."
as the construction of the excursion park) reflects both growing public support for the preservation of places deemed wild or pristine and the increasing popularity of Thoreau's text.

Although the town of Concord has long been a popular tourist destination because of its historical and literary significance, the prominence of Walden as a national "shrine" (as opposed to simply a popular recreation site) increased in the middle of the twentieth century, as important "relics" were discovered and the site became more closely associated with Thoreau and his text, both rapidly attaining status as cultural icons. In 1945, a devotee of Thoreau excavated the remains of Thoreau's hut; two years later, the Thoreau Society, founded in 1941 by Thoreau enthusiasts, commemorated the hut site with a historical plaque that remains to this day. The site has also been marked by "Thoreauvian pilgrims" who perform a ritual of commemoration by placing stones on a large cairn next to the hut's foundation.

The relationship between Thoreau's consecration of Walden, the subsequent history of its preservation, and the related ecological implications is borne out in a legal battle that ensued when concerned members of The Thoreau Society formed the Save Walden Committee in 1957 in order to protest the recent construction of an artificial beach at Walden and to prevent further alterations to the site. The court case between the Middlesex County Commissioners, who aimed to accommodate steadily increasing numbers of visitors to Walden, and the Save Walden Committee, whose supporters equated development with desecration, demonstrates the powerful rhetorical, political, and ecological effects of Thoreau's consecration. The campaign to preserve the "primitive," "unspoiled," "natural," or "original" condition of Walden Pond and its surrounding woods received local, national and global attention, and the public outcry against the desecration of Walden reinforced its designation as a sacred site and elevated its status to, in the estimation of the Thoreau Society, "perhaps the most cherished natural acreage in the world." 18

The campaign to "save Walden" was deemed a success, and the court case resulted in the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruling on 3 May 1960 against further topographical changes and mandating specific measures aimed at restoring Walden to the greatest extent possible, to its former condition. Nonetheless, representatives from the Department of the Interior concluded that the original natural condition of the pond was irrevocably altered by the Middlesex County Commissioners' attempts to render Walden more amenable as a recreation site. This conclusion, along with developments within the American environmentalist movement more generally, led to a gradual shift in emphasis from the rhetoric of "preservation" to the more recent model of "stewardship" and ecological "management." 18

Campaigns to protect Walden from human alterations to the landscape and from the inevitable impact of hundreds of thousands of visitors per year have reappeared in subsequent decades, and both the reputation of Walden as a historic "shrine" and attempts to preserve or otherwise maintain the site have continued to grow. In 1965, Walden Pond became a Registered National Historic Landmark, and a decade later responsibility for the reservation was transferred from Middlesex County to the Department of Environmental Management, thereby connecting Walden to other protected lands within the Massachusetts State Forests and Parks system.

The most recent of these conservation movements, the Walden Woods Project, aims to expand the acreage of the reserve to include 2,680 acres of woodlands. This goal reflects a shift from the preservationism of the Save Walden Committee to a more ecologically-minded approach that sees the larger Walden ecosystem as essential to the natural and cultural integrity of the pond. Founded by recording artist Don Henley in 1990, the Walden Woods Project is a current manifestation of the relationship between conservation and consecration. Its approach to protecting Walden is especially illuminating because it brings together insights from religion
and from contemporary ecological science for the benefit not only of the particular ecosystem of Walden Pond, but for the environment in general. Without romanticizing Walden as pristine, Henley appeals to a theological model of stewardship and argues for the protection of Walden Woods by emphasizing the crucial symbolic role of the pond both as "intrinsically valuable" and as "the cradle of the environmental movement." The environmental ethic motivating the Walden Woods Project exemplifies the ecological implications—past, present, and future—of Thoreau’s consecration of Walden Pond and, by extension, of demarcating sacred natural sites in general.

The shift in approaches to the protection and maintenance of Walden as a natural and cultural shrine over the past century contributes a number of important insights to the relationship between religion and ecology. The rhetoric employed by the Save Walden Committee, which sought to preserve Walden in its original, pristine form, reflects the problematic assumption that both nature and religion are essentially static. The rhetoric of preservation, when applied to a site like Walden, fails to recognize the fundamentally dynamic character not only of nature and religion, which are themselves constantly changing processes involving and impacting both humans and the environment, but also and especially of demarcated sacred sites such as Walden, which are quintessentially both natural and cultural. When understood as microcosms of a fundamentally dynamic world that is both natural and cultural, sacred and mundane, consecrated natural sites like Walden exemplify the mutually constitutive relationships between religion, science, and the environment and offer new and strategic insights for addressing the various local and global ecological crises that must be faced today.

Works cited:


The Thoreau Society. Letter to members of the Massachusetts General Court (February 19, 1958). Thoreau Institute archives, Concord, Mass.


The Boston Theological Institute