

*Sacred Sites as a Threat to Environmental Justice?
Where Environmental Spirituality and Justice Meet*

Mark Cladis
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I don't know who came up with the title for this panel, but I like it: "Environmental Resistance, Sacred and Secular." Does it mean sacred and secular resistance to *environmentalism*, or sacred and secular resistance to *anti-environmental* forces? I assume the later, but my paper looks at both ways, that is, how the sacred and the secular potentially both *challenge* and *contribute* to environmental justice. My task in this paper is to explore the antagonism and the potentially beneficial intersection of environmental justice and religion—specifically, religion in the form of "sacred sites."

Environmental justice would be undermined if sacred sites were privileged in such a way as to license environmental harm in what many would deem non-sacred sites. There are, for example, "sacrifice zones"—low-income areas that have been severely impaired by industrial pollution—that rarely appear to people as sacred sites, but which, from an environmental justice perspective, nonetheless deserve to be protected from harm.

This paper begins with the U.S. government's pursuit of uranium and the ensuing desecration of sacred Navajo sites. Not surprisingly, I argue that Native American sacred sites should receive environmental protection. Given President Trump's recent approval of the Keystone XL and Dakota Access pipelines despite persistent Native American non-native protests, this is a timely issue in the U.S. Next, I explore the nature of the sacred sites as an intrinsic quality in some cases and as a sociolinguistic construction in others, and I argue that while intrinsically remarkable sites are more likely to garner environmental protection, all sacred sites should be treated with respect and care.

And then I develop why the very idea of "sacred sites" is potentially problematic for environmental justice and environmental political theory. I then turn to my central question: Is there a way to honor the idea of discrete, sacred sites while also insisting that no place be subject to unnecessary environmental harm? I show that we can honor sacred sites as well as the idea that the earth *in its entirety* is a place to be treated with care. For this final claim, I draw on resources from environmental justice and political theory as well as Native American traditions and Christian eco-theological traditions.

I. Shiprock Against Radioactive Headwinds

I begin this investigation into the topic of the sacred and environmental justice by focusing on *Shiprock*, or *Tsé Bit' a' i'*, a sacred mountain in the Navajo nation. Shiprock is a massive geological formation known as a volcanic neck or plug—the remains of a solidified lava core of a dormant volcanic pinnacle. Shiprock rises out of the Colorado Plateau. For many, it is almost impossible not to think of the desert surrounding Shiprock as aquatic. In every direction it reaches out to meet the horizon, and its dips and swells look like beige, rolling waves. The name, *Shiprock*, is not incidental to this oceanic landscape. Supposedly, early white settlers in the 1870s saw a resemblance between the rock and a windjammer under full sail. But it is the high, oceanic sands that make the ship-rock float. Take them away and it vanishes. It becomes something else.

It *is* something else to the Navajo. To their eyes it was never a ship in an ocean. Why would the desert look like an ocean to a people with little exposure (at least in their recent history) to oceans and much exposure to deserts? To the Navajo the desert looked like a desert—not the empty, boundless wasteland of the Euro-American imagination, but an abode replete with various animal, plant, and human communities. And the rock—that magnificent igneous intrusion—looked to them like *Tsé Bit'a'i'*, or Winged Rock. *Tsé Bit'a'i'* is a place that speaks of deliverance and loss, of promising beginnings and painful endings. It is a sacred place, separate from ordinary existence, which can fascinate—simultaneously entice and frighten—with its grave appearance and history in Navajo tradition. Many legends refer to *Tsé Bit'a'i'*, but the most famous is set in a time when the Navajo people, the Diné, were persecuted by their enemies. The *Hatalii* (medicine men) prayed for help, and the Holy Ones heard their plea. The earth heaved and released a great bird that carried the Diné eastward on its back. Having delivered the Diné to safety, the great bird turned into stone, where it remains today.

Shiprock, then, is a sacred site to the Navajo—and to others as well, but evidently not to the U.S. government. In the vicinity of Shiprock, the government pursued a different kind of religion, namely, the practice and credo of the Cold War's nuclear arms race, which led to the construction of hundreds of uranium mines in the Southwestern desert. Uranium was unearthed, bombs were built and stockpiled, and Tuba City—the Navajo Nation's largest community—became a central office for the Rare Metals Corporation and the Atomic Energy Commission. All in all, about 3.9 million tons of uranium were dug up from 1944 to 1986 (Pasternak 2006). The U.S. Government was the consumer, private mining companies were the producers, and Native Americans were the exploited. The Navajo miners, who were in desperate need of employment, were neither provided any protective gear nor told of known health risks. Moreover, without their knowledge or consent, they became the subjects of medical investigations on radiation exposure. Many suffered and died from lung cancer and other diseases, and their pain—physical and psychological—spread to family and community members (Brugge et al. 2006). When the mines shut down as the Cold War thawed, fences and other basic precautions against the dangers of nuclear debris failed to go up. To this day, piles of radioactive waste and miles of open tunnels and pits deface tribal lands, and radioactive dust carried by desert winds contaminates Navajo, Hopi, and Mormon communities, amongst others. In the Navajo Nation alone, there are over 1,000 abandoned uranium mines and four abandoned uranium mills (Brugge et al. 2006). Several abandoned mines and one transfer station are located in the vicinity of Shiprock. No wonder the Navajo named uranium, *leetso*, yellow dirt, which, to their ears, sounds like a reptilian monster (Brugge et al. 2006).

II. Durkheim, the Sacred, and the Ancient Echo between People and Place

What is sacred and respected to one people may be raided and disposable to another. This, then, brings me to one of my central tasks: to address the question, what is the nature of the sacred? What engenders sacredness? To address this question, it is worthwhile to turn to the French social theorist Emile Durkheim, whose work largely centered on the category of the sacred. Durkheim deemed that *anything* could be held deeply sacred by a people—a worm or weed, a stump of a tree or common stone. The sacredness of an object, according to Durkheim, has nothing to do with inherent worth or remarkable properties. Rather, it all depends on what a group happens to value. The sacred worm of the Worm People is not intrinsically sacred. Rather, it is *made* or *deemed* sacred by the collective representations of the people, especially insofar as it stands as a collective emblem of the group.

A Durkheimian account of the origin of the sacred can be illustrated by the nineteenth century imaginary of the Darwinian horde: an amorphous group of early humans driven by biological drives. The population of this group is usually dispersed, occasionally jointly pursuing such utilitarian activities as hunting. Imagine, however, that one evening they gather as a group and, while eating their kill around a fire, they experience a sort of social electricity generated by their collectivity, or what Durkheim called effervescence. They had experienced something like it before, but this time it is different, because this time they were able to name it. As the shadows lengthened, they had caught sight of a fleeing kangaroo, thus revealing what they took to be the source of the group's effervescence—indeed, the basis of the members' lives: it is the Kangaroo, and they are the people of the Kangaroo. Now everything changes. The universe can now be divided between that which belongs to the Kangaroo and that which does not, and from this springs all other classification systems. And with social identity comes social ideals: hence these hitherto biologically driven creatures are transformed into socially creative humans.

We have reached the beginning of society, and it commences with the birth of the sacred: the totem as a symbolic, religious representation of the community.¹ What was once a mere band of discrete individuals becomes an idealized, sacred clan. What was once a mere plant or animal—a turkey or edible root, for instance—becomes a sacred totem, the very source of life. To employ Durkheim's language, the sacred character assumed by aspects of the empirical world cannot be attributed to innate properties of that world; the sacred is *added* to the empirical world, and thereby becomes part of our description of it. The distinctive character of religious beliefs and practices, in Durkheim's view, is that they form a shared sociolinguistic framework that divides the furniture of the universe into two mutually exclusive categories, the sacred and the profane. Religious beliefs and practices represent the sacred and its dramatic opposition to the profane. The profane is not inherently evil or contemptible. It is merely pedestrian; but as the pedestrian, it is in radical opposition to the sacred. According to this Durkheimian view, then, the sacred denotes collective, supple forces that can bring anything—any object, person, or gesture—into the category of the sacred.

On this account, Shiprock is not intrinsically sacred or remarkable. Rather, it is *deemed* sacred, due to contingent circumstance, by the collective representations of the Navajo. As Shiprock has become a symbolic, collective emblem of the Navajo, it has acquired sacred status. I often find Durkheim's theory of the sacred quite plausible and useful. I have employed it to account for the sanctity of human rights in modernity as well as the religious aspects of modern practices that are not usually considered religious, such as our consumptive practices pertaining to everything from sports and entrainment to vacations and clothing. However, having seen Shiprock, I maintain that Shiprock reminds us of what we intuitively know and what Durkheim neglected: some things and places are *intrinsically* remarkable and, like gravity, they attract us and hold us in place. See a Shiprock and be struck with wonder—whoever you are, whatever your background. And when the U.S. government exploits such a sacred site, it is an act of *blasphemy*, not simply ignorance. The government should know better. That's plain for all to see.

¹ It is doubtful that totemism ever existed as Durkheim understood it, that is, as a primitive, universal institution marked invariably by the totemic emblem, totemic taboos, and exogamy. Nonetheless, the Durkheimian idea of collective emblems remains a useful and powerful explanatory devise.

Still, questions remains: if sacred sites possess a universally intrinsic quality for “all to see,” what are we to say about Durkheim’s theory that the sacred is the product of local, social construction? Must we choose between these two positions? Is there a way to either reconcile them or, at the very least, to employ each position productively for different sites? Let me begin with what I know—with the basics. From these lower rungs I will make my ascent as if on a ladder.

First rung. Some sites are *not* intrinsically exceptional, but rather become significant by way of cultural stories and traditions. This is the Durkheimian position. A while ago I visited St. Catherine’s monastery on Jordan’s Sinai Peninsula. I knew that St. Catherine’s was built at the foot of Mount Sinai, and I had expected that I would immediately recognize the mountain. Even if it were not shrouded mysteriously in clouds or illuminated by numinous light, surely the height, breadth, or shape of Mount Sinai would distinguish it. But distinguished it wasn’t. I had to ask, “On which of these plain rocky crags did Moses meet God?” *Tradition* (not geology) anointed that indistinct mountaintop with infinite distinction.

Second rung. Some sites, like that of Shiprock, are *intrinsically* spectacular. To deny this would be to cling irrationally to the theory that *all* perception is cultural projection. Common sense tells me otherwise. Show me a Shiprock, and I’ll show you a sacred site. I should add that some Navajo sites are recognized as sacred due to the intrinsic, healing powers found in its plants, herbs, minerals, and waters (Beck et al. 1996).²

Third rung. Intrinsically impressive sites such as Shiprock attract to them cultural production, like magnets for the social filings of myths, songs, stories, and rituals. These in turn infuse the features of the landscape with rich, interpretive traditions, making these places all the more significant. They become *storied* landscapes.

Forth rung. These impressive sites, having been fashioned in the past by some combination of geology and culture, shape their current inhabitants. Their inhabitants, in turn, contribute to the landscape, adding their own stories, participating in *the ancient echo between people and place*.

Fifth rung. In shaping us, a place potentially contributes to our maturation as human beings. Given the proper attention, a place can tutor our emotions, develop our character, and expand our reasoning. It can endow a particular path on which we travel through life.

Sixth rung. Although different lands impart different lessons, all instances of “humanscaping” share this: they can enable us to become more alert and aware. The external landscape inspires consideration of an interior landscape that we may otherwise neglect. As we look outward with care and attention, the land reflects back our focus, inwardly, instructively. The land acts as a mirror, except that it reveals not an outward image but an internal one. Having traveled inward, our focus—now sharper—returns to the outward world, changed and educated. We can think of the land as we would any teacher: as a facilitator of the student’s voyage that moves concurrently inwardly and outwardly—toward knowledge of self and knowledge of world.

Seventh rung. Here I take the most untried step and reach an unexplored region, a *terra incognita*. After we have learned deeply from a place, we move somewhat beyond it. Although the land is never dispensable and certainly not disposable, the lessons of the land, at least

² In general, it is often claimed that sacred sites are places of special power, often due to the history of (or presence of) ancestors or other spiritual beings. For the purposes of this paper, I take an agnostic stance on such claims.

according to the Navajo, point to something beyond the land (while always remaining connected to it and bringing reverence to it).

III. “There are only Sacred Places and Desecrated Places”

Although I employed the metaphor of a ladder to depict the process of an advancing argument, it would be a mistake to interpret that process as an ascent up and out of the materiality of the natural and social worlds. Sacred sites, whether that of Shiprock or Mount Sinai, are infused with geological and sociolinguistic formations. No sacred sites escape materiality, whether social or natural. I have claimed that, in some cases, cultures *deem* places as sacred. These sites are not intrinsically remarkable. In other cases, I have claimed that cultures *recognize* places as sacred. These sites do possess intrinsically remarkable properties. Yet in both set of cases, cultural materiality (the stuff of language and practices) is operative. And in both cases, the sacred demands our respect. When the U.S. government exploited and polluted sacred sites in the Navajo Nation, it refused to honor either the intrinsic or the culturally produced sacredness of Navajo sites. This was surely the case of Shiprock. The government refused to listen to and learn from the sacred mountain.

This, then, brings me to address explicitly the topic of “sacred sites” in relation to environmental degradation and justice. The U.S. government, and the U.S. population more generally, is more likely to recognize and respect a sacred site that is intrinsically remarkable than one that is deemed sacred by cultural attribution (though, I should add, even intrinsically remarkable sites are subject to exploitation). In terms of environmental justice, then, a site that is *deemed* sacred by a culture—deemed sacred, for example, due to its place in oral or written tradition—is less likely to be protected by the U.S. government from environmental harm. If it’s not a spectacular Creator Lake or a monumental Shiprock, it’s more like to be subject to violation. There are, of course, Native American sacred sites which are not necessarily intrinsically remarkable that have been protected from environmental degradation. But such protection is usually the result of long, protracted court battles. Sometimes Native American plaintiffs win these legal cases, yet often they do not. My main argument here is that the susceptibility to environmental harm of Native peoples’ sacred sites should not be dependent on whether those sites appear intrinsically remarkable for all to see. All sacred sites should be honored and therefore protected from environmental harm.

This claim, no doubt, will seem uncontroversial to many, especially to those who are sympathetic to the claims and struggles of Native peoples and who are aware of the ways that Native populations have been subject to colonization and extermination by the U.S. government. In the next turn of my argument, however, I want to note why the very idea of “sacred sites” is in fact potentially problematic for environmental justice. It may be a mistake to link environmental justice to the idea of sacred sites (as I have discussed them thus far) because *environmental justice should not be invoked only in cases of sacred sites*. The pursuit of environmental justice would greatly undermined if sacred sites were privileged in such a way as to license environmental harm and risk to what some would deem non-sacred sites. There are, for example, “sacrifice zones”—low-income areas that have been severely impaired by industrial pollution—

that rarely appear as sacred sites, but from an environmental justice perspective, these places deserve to be honored and protected from harm.³

Is there a way, then, to honor the idea of sacred sites while also insisting that no site be subjected to harm and environmental degradation? Perhaps we should claim that all the earth, our planetary home, is sacred and deserves respect and care? But on making that claim, *do we leave the domain of secular environmental justice and enter environmental spirituality?* The rest of the paper is focused on this question. I will argue that environmental justice and environmental spirituality need not be understood as divergent domains but rather as mutually enhancing ones. We can acknowledge practices and beliefs that honor *discrete, sacred sites* as well as those that honor *the earth in its entirety* as a place to be treated with care and even reverence. This position would insist that *all places* are subject to environmental justice and care while also maintaining the *some spaces* be treated with particular reverence.

In “How to be a Poet,” Wendell Berry writes:

There are no unsacred places;
there are only sacred places
and desecrated places (Berry, *New Collected*, 2012: 354)

This creed is fundamental to both environmental spirituality and environmental justice. It is found in many indigenous traditions as well as in Euro-American Christian and Buddhist traditions. The Navajo, for example, treat *some places* as distinctive, sacred sites—often places for rituals or gathering medicinal herbs—yet they also insist that *all the land* of the Navajo Nation, between the four sacred mountains, is sacred and should be treated with care and respect. And, more inclusive still, the Navajo understand Mother Earth and Father Sky as sacred pairs (Beck et al. 1996). These Navajo perspectives are found among other tribal groups; it is common to recognize special, discrete sites as sacred as well as the entire tribal region and the earth more broadly.⁴

In this view, every region, valley, mountain and sea has its own dynamic set of complex, interdependent relationships among its animate and inanimate members. Human members are obligated to enter these relationships with respect, and this respect entails refraining from creating an imbalance. Many Native American traditions hold that “all the elements in the universe are paired and balance each other” (Beck et al. 1996: 12). Unwise actions or traumatic events can introduce imbalance and cause harm to individuals, communities, and to “the land.” The Blessingway, a Navajo healing ceremony, seeks to restore a lost balance. Every region—and not just special sacred sites—has a particular harmony that is distinctive, even as that harmony is ever shifting. The Blessingway ceremony, then, requires attentiveness and attunement to the dynamic order of a place.

³ I am not making the claim that there are in fact no or few “sacred sites” in sacrifice zones, only that U.S. industries and politics rarely treat sacrifice zones as containing anything like sacred sites.

⁴ As Robert S. Michaelsen noted in 1986, “Some [Native American] traditionalists have claimed that in keeping with their religion, *all* land on which the tribe has lived, celebrated, and worshipped in the past is sacred and hence essential to tribal free exercise of religion” (Michaelsen 1986: 108-09).

What have we said? In many Native American traditions it is held that there are extraordinary, sacred sites—places of special power and healing, often due to their relation to spirits and ancestors. According to the Cree, one is never more than one hundred miles from a powerful, sacred site. But many Native traditions also maintain that all of the tribal land—indeed, all of the earth—is sacred and worthy of respect. This dual view, honoring special parts as well as the integrity of the whole, can be found in a variety of religious traditions. Thich Nhat Hanh, for example, acknowledges special sites of pilgrimage yet assures us that, “This spot where you sit is your own spot. It is on this very spot and in this very moment that you can become enlightened. You don’t have to sit beneath a special tree in a distant land” (Hanh 1987: 36).

In Christian traditions, there is of course the practice of pilgrimage to revered sites, and healing is often associated with such extraordinary sites. Yet, as with the Navajo, one can also find in Christian traditions perspectives that honor and respect all of creation. Sallie McFague, for example, argues that Christians ought to think of the universe as the body of God. She writes, “The model of the universe as God’s body suggests both an anthropology and a theology—a way of seeing our proper place as inspirited bodies within the larger body, within the scheme of things, and a way of seeing both the immanence and the transcendence of God—God as the inspirited body of the whole universe” (McFague 1993: 22). McFague’s proposal is not a restatement of the familiar claim that God’s creation is good and holy and hence ought to be appropriately cared for it. Rather, going beyond the stewardship model, she offers a model in which the total materiality of the universe, including our bodies, is God’s own body and is therefore holy—indeed, divine. As a Christian theologian, McFague is careful to note that God is more than the summation of all materiality. Not wanting to reduce God to the material universe, and perhaps thereby slipping into pantheism, she maintains that God encompasses the material universe but is also more than it. As a panentheist, she asserts that “Everything that is is *in* God and God is *in* all things and yet God is not identical with the universe, for the universe is dependent on God in a way that God is not dependent on the universe” (McFague 1993: 149). The world, then, is indeed divine, but it does not exhaustively define divinity.

From a Christian perspective, Wendell Berry also maintains that all the earth should be deemed holy and even divine. Berry writes as a Christian, Emersonian prophet—as one who loves biblical traditions and who seeks to hold Christians hostage to their own highest, theological ideals. As a practitioner of immanent critique, Berry issues trenchant judgments on Christianity’s past and present, condemning its disastrous support of unjust wars and its participation in devastating environmental and cultural destruction (including the oppression and economic exploitation of indigenous peoples). He writes,

Christian organizations, to this day, remain largely indifferent to the rape and plunder of the world and its traditional cultures. It is hardly too much to say that most Christian organizations are as happily indifferent to the ecological, cultural, and religious implications of industrial economics as are most industrial organizations. The certified Christian seems just as likely as anyone else to join the military-industrial conspiracy to murder Creation (Berry, *Sex, Economy*, 1993: 94).

Berry maintains that much cultural and environmental destruction is the result of Christianity’s failure to acknowledge its own expansive, theological understanding of the nature of the sacred or the holy. “The holiness of life,” Berry observes, “is obscured to modern Christians by the idea that the only holy place is the build church... and most of them could think of their houses or

farms or shops or factories as holy places only with great effort and embarrassment” (Berry, *Sex, Economy*, 1993: 100). If factories, Berry suggests, could be constructed, operated, and treated as holy places, then we may come to appreciate the practical relevance of his line of verse, “There are no unsacred places.” Berry’s Christian, expansive view of the sacred is similar to Navajo perspectives that recognize the sacred not only as discrete, special sites but also as the entire tribal region and even the earth in its totality. And although Berry usually employs a stewardship position, albeit with radical, practical implications, he comes close to McFague’s panentheism when he cites approvingly the claim of the Greek Orthodox theologian Philip Sherrard, “Creation is nothing less than the manifestation of God’s hidden Being” (Berry, *Sex, Economy*, 1993: 98).

IV. The Meeting of Spirituality and Environmental Justice

I do not wish, of course, to essentialize Native American or Christian perspectives. I do, however, wish to claim that: 1) among both one can find the view that all the earth is sacred; and 2) by underscoring such a claim one need not privilege environmental spirituality over environmental justice. There are practical, environmental sensibilities tied to the theological view that all the earth is holy. While discrete, sacred sites are afforded both special honor and modes of respect, all the land, sky, and sea receive respect and reverence and, therefore, deserve forms of environmental protection.

This normative belief that the entire planet deserves to be treated with respect, and not only approached in an instrumental fashion, is not limited to religious and/or indigenous perspectives. Such political theorists as Sharon Krause, Bruce Jennings, and John Dryzek offer arguments, sometimes couched in the language of eco-constitutionalism, that non-human organic and inorganic entities (across the planet) deserve care and respect.¹ I will add, however, that while their arguments implicitly rest on the idea that non-human organic and inorganic entities have intrinsic value, the case for intrinsic value (except for the case of animal rights) is not particularly robust. I’m not claiming that secular approaches cannot provide robust arguments for the intrinsic value and hence warranted respect for non-human entities. I’m only claiming this challenge has yet to be met.

In any case, my task and challenge in this paper has been to relate the very idea of “sacred sites” to environmental justice. I have argued that some sites, whether due to intrinsic features or social construction, are recognized or deemed as especially powerful and sacred, and these sites should receive environmental protection—protection for the land and its inhabitants. This is a critical and timely claim in light of the U.S. government’s recent approval of the Keystone XL and Dakota Access pipelines. While affirming the value of the notion of discrete, “sacred sites,” I also supported the notion of the earth itself as holy or at least to be respected, and the corollary view that *no place*, then, should be subject to desecration or disregard--and thus not be treated exclusively in an instrumental fashion. This argument seems important, lest privileging discrete, sacred sites put all other sites at an environmental disadvantage. Shiprock deserves respect and environmental care. So do socioeconomically disadvantaged sacrifice zones.

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¹ See, for example, Bruce Jennings, *Ecological Governance: Toward A New Social Contract with the Earth* (West Virginia University Press, 2016), 179, 185-7; John Dryzek, , "Institutions for the Anthropocene: Governance in a Changing Earth System," *British Journal of Political Science*, January 2016, 4, 7; and Sharon Krause, "Environmental Domination and the Ecology of Emancipation," the Political Philosophy Workshop, Brown University, October 2017.