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# For the Wild: Ritual and Commitment in Radical Eco-Activism by Sarah M. Pike

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## **“Who See Themselves As Heroes of a History Not Yet Told”**

***For the Wild: Ritual and Commitment in Radical Eco-Activism*** by SARAH M. PIKE  
U of California P, 2017. \$34.95 USD

Reviewed by ALDA BALTHROP-LEWIS

Scholars of religion can contribute helpfully to the study of environmentalism. Sarah Pike's *For the Wild* is an excellent illustration of this thesis. The book is an ethnographic study of radical environmental and animal rights activists—the kind who sit in trees, block roads, and burn down animal testing facilities (making sure to harm no living beings). Much of her work was with Earth First! and Animal Liberation Front. The book describes how childhood experiences and ongoing ritual practices lead activists like these to commit to the direct action they undertake, and the book insists on the importance of the emotions of wonder, love, compassion, anger, and grief to the commitments of radical activists. Pike examines the lives of contemporary activists through personal correspondence, some of it from prison; interviews; participant observation; and analysis of published, archived, and ephemeral print materials.

Whereas outsiders to the academic study of religion sometimes assume that scholars of religion study institutional forms of religion, many scholars in our field use the tools of religious studies to study features of life and culture that are ordinarily thought of apart from traditional religions. Ritual studies is a key feature of the study of religion, and Pike brings her expertise in this field to bear on activities most citizens would likely call protest, not ritual. She makes a persuasive case that “rites of

protest” build spiritual worlds. Through these rituals, activists undergo conversion to new selves and continually transform their activist identities into enacted commitments. Their practice and belief are mutually informing, as for example in the case from Pike's Chapter 4, about forest action camps and the conviction that trees are sacred.

One of the key contributions of Pike's book is that it gives scholars across disciplines concrete, lively accounts of what these environmental activists are doing and why. The beginning of the book focuses on activists' lives (Chapter 1) and the historical contexts of the communities Pike worked with (Chapter 2). The rest of the book's chapters follow the “lifespan of activism” and attend to different emotions and rituals that shape the commitments of activists. Chapter 3 discusses the importance of childhood wonder to activist commitment, Chapter 4 love and kinship in forest activism, Chapter 5 anger in punk rock animal rights, Chapter 6 conflict and rituals of inclusion, and Chapter 7 martyrdom and grief for communities of the beloved.

Pike also shows that activists' actions are informed by moral thinking. She is adamant that while activists like these are sometimes described by law enforcement as criminals and even terrorists, “the young activists I spoke with were some of the most sensitive and thoughtfully moral people I have ever met” (72). She explains their moral thinking, according to which direct action is a form of civil disobedience drawing on a “morally passionate American lineage of resistance to injustice” (57).

In Pike's account, Henry David Thoreau is a key example for these activists. “Most activists identify with the lineage of Thoreau; they approve of his rejection of taxation and adopt civil disobedience as a

strategy. They also share Thoreau's sense of kinship with a natural world that in many ways remains beyond human understanding" (113). In the example from Chapter 4, where activists hold trees sacred, the activists have a particularly close alliance with Thoreau's thought. It is not in the scope of Pike's project to elaborate the parallels, but where she focuses on the activists' siding with Thoreau, a closer look exposes both affinities and fault lines between Thoreau and these contemporary activists.

Thoreau, too, held that trees are sacred. In *Walden* he had written that trees were "shrines I visited both summer and winter." In 1858 he published an essay, "Chesuncook," in *The Atlantic*. In a paragraph that recounted the reasons Thoreau did not like to see trees cut down, he concluded of "the pine," "It is immortal as I am, and perchance will go to as high a heaven, there to tower above me still." The editor deleted the sentence. James Russell Lowell might have thought that readers would object to a view that seemed like Christian heresy—trees going to heaven. Thoreau was enraged, writing that the deletion was "bigoted and timid." He refused to publish anything with Lowell thereafter. Pike's activists hold similar views about the sacredness of trees. The most famous tree-sitter, Julia Butterfly Hill, described falling to her knees and crying when she went into the redwood forest for the first time. Pike explains, "activists come to see trees as sacred beings" (125).

However, on the subject of "the wild" Pike's activists' views go beyond Thoreau's. "Activists side with the wild against civilization," and they aim at "rewilding" themselves and their communities (207). In this, they also take a view people do tend to associate with Thoreau, who famously

wrote, "in Wildness is the preservation of the World." But while Thoreau did often praise the wild, over the course of his life Thoreau found wisdom on both sides of the distinction between wild and cultivated. Among other things, Thoreau's farming practices—a kind of cultivation—put him at odds with some of Pike's activists who are steadily on the side of wildness. In many cases, they reject domestication writ large, even the domestication of plants (119, 227).

In this, Pike's activists take an even more radical stand than their predecessor. Like Thoreau, however, contemporary environmental activists like those Pike studies are willing to put their lives on the line. They "see themselves as heroes of a history not yet told" (55). Through her description of their activism, Pike offers an engaging account of who they are, what they do, and what motivates their activism. She has done scholars of environmentalism a great favour by making their beliefs and practices so vividly available to us.

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