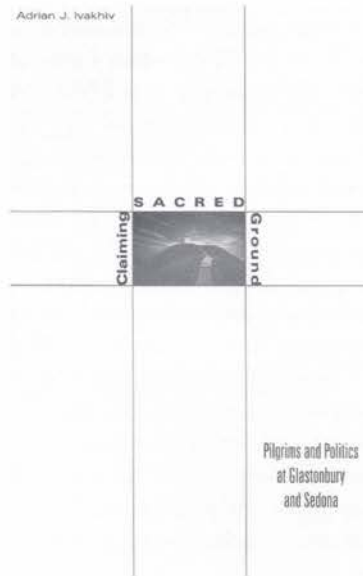


corporate globalization and environmental activists in Canada, offering urban protestors a valuable grounding in the political economy of their own country.

But *Writing Off the Rural West* will be most valuable for the rural audience. In their introduction, Epp and Whitson declare their commitment to the survival of rural communities: "An underlying argument of this book is that rural communities should not be 'written off' in the language of bankers and economists."

Instead of giving up on the rural, Epp and Whitson have put together an analysis of "nomad capitalism" which rural communities can use to resist further exploitation and to develop policies and practices which support rural livelihoods. The book diligently exposes the contradictions between many of the conservative governments and policies rural voters support and the consequences of those policies on rural lands and people. My one disappointment was that the reasons for this contradiction were insufficiently addressed, discussed only in a final chapter, "The Political De-Skilling of Rural Communities" by Roger Epp, which presumes too much familiarity with Albertan political history and moves too quickly from the empirical to the theoretical. Epp does better at outlining a theoretical "democratic politics of place" than analyzing why such a vision is not currently popular in rural Alberta, or rural Canada generally.



Claiming Sacred Ground: Pilgrims and Politics at Glastonbury and Sedona

Adrian J. Ivakhiv

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Reviewed by Rich Oddie

Combining extensive historical research with first-hand observations, *Claiming Sacred Ground* examines how the towns of Glastonbury, England, and Sedona, Arizona, have come to be regarded as "sacred sites" or "power places" by adherents of the New Age movement. The author sit-

uates his study within the larger context of cultural and economic globalization, in relation to which New Age spirituality can be seen as one of many competing narratives that attempt to define the purpose and direction of human existence in an age of unprecedented complexity and uncertainty. According to this New Age narrative, we are in the midst of an epochal shift that offers the possibility of a renewed spiritual connection between human and non-human beings; a re-enchantment of reality that will allow us to recover the sense of wonder, joy and reverence that has allegedly been destroyed by the secular, rationalist worldview. Drawing upon real or imagined traditions that predate those of the modern age, New Age spirituality aims to establish a deeper connection with nature and the non-human world, usually understood as spiritual, supernatural or extraterrestrial beings and forces that transcend our everyday experience. Often, this quest for personal transformation is linked to particular places and landscapes that are deemed to be sacred or powerful. *Claiming Sacred Ground* focuses on two of the most well-known of these sacred sites, exploring the ways in which meaning is recreated and renegotiated by the various actors, human and non-human, which inhabit them.

The beginning of the book provides an overview of the various conceptions of nature found within the New Age and "earth spirituality" movement and a brief history of various theoretical approaches to the study of sacred space. Ivakhiv describes his own approach as a form of "critical sympathy" that merges critical social science with direct observation and participation in the object of study; in this case, the New Age communities of Glastonbury and Sedona. This implicitly phenomenological approach emphasizes the cultural, social and historical context of others' beliefs and practices, attempting to under-

stand them from the perspective of the believer while maintaining a “healthy skepticism.”¹ From the outset, the author makes it clear that, unlike many other publications on the subject of the New Age movement, he is interested in exploring the conflicting worldviews and cultural practices that have defined these particular places as sacred sites, rather than attempting to support or subvert the truth claims of New Agers and ecospiritualists. As part of the research for this book, Ivakhiv actually lived for a few months in each of these two towns, integrating with the New Age or “alternative” communities and attempting to better understand how these people experience the surrounding landscape as sacred. As a result, this book demonstrates a real sensitivity to the beliefs of those people for whom Glastonbury and Sedona are experienced as powerful, even holy, places.

At the same time, we are provided with a great deal of historical details that demonstrates the extent to which New Age adherents have created the “place-myths” of Glastonbury and Sedona, merging historical facts with creative fictions to create new stories of the sacred nature of the landscape. However, Ivakhiv does not assign a passive role to the landscape itself in this formation of sacred space, maintaining that such spaces are not purely social constructs but rather the historical products of the interaction between humans and “specific extrahuman environments.” They are described as “liminal zones” with unique environmental and interpretive features, separated from and largely defined in opposition to the values and meanings of everyday social life. In the case of both of the sites described here, we find that the landscape is historically linked to pre-modern spiritual traditions, containing a wide variety of unusual and impressive geographic features, and inviting multiple interpretations rather than

being dominated by a single cultural narrative. These contested spaces or “heterotopias” attract “ecospiritual pilgrims,” providing the foundation for a spiritual community that grounds itself through the production of stories about the power and significance of the surrounding landscape, gradually creating a sense of collective identity by means of ritual and communal practices, including regular events and celebrations at these sacred sites. With his use of rich detail, Ivakhiv shows how the spiritual communities of Glastonbury and Sedona have developed over time, continually redefining the surrounding culture, the landscape and themselves in the process. Much emphasis is placed on the political conflicts between the various cultural groups within each town, particularly those between the New Age communities and more conservative residents, both secular and religious, who view these communities as a threat to the local economy and/or traditional ways of life. The chapters on Glastonbury are especially interesting, where the links between the town’s “alternative community” and “counterculture” movements throughout Britain, including direct-action environmentalism and various occult traditions, are explored.

Throughout the book, and particularly in the final chapters, the author invites us to consider New Age and ecospirituality as a legitimate manifestation of the desire for a more meaningful relationship with the nonhuman world, a desire that is increasingly evident within modern, technological societies. In his own words, “If the claims made by some of these questers sometimes appear immodest, unsophisticated, or scientifically dismissable, the intuition that lies behind them is certainly worthy of attention: it is that the effort to make sense (and livelihood) of the world can become too forceful in its grasp, squeezing its component parts to the absolute maximum of resource productivity.”

While recognizing that much of the New Age movement demonstrates the very same ethic of individualism and consumerism in its approach to spirituality and “self-development” that characterizes the technocratic modern world it opposes, Ivakhiv maintains that the notion of sacred space can help to engender respect and even reverence for the non-human world, creating stronger links between local culture, community and the land. His “cultural-hermeneutic” view of sacred places as the product of human interpretations of the non-human world warns against fixed, dogmatic conceptions of sacredness and spirituality, advocating a dialogical approach that attempts to mediate between conflicting cultural interpretations while acknowledging the needs of both human and non-human actors. While such an approach is only briefly sketched out here, *Claiming Sacred Ground* provides a fascinating look at how these two particular natural landscapes have come to be defined as sites of spiritual power and reconnection.

Notes

1. While Ivakhiv briefly outlines his “hermeneutic-phenomenological” methodology, it must be noted that little attempt is made to explain the history and significance of this approach for environmental and cultural studies.