
New Streams of Religion: Fly Fishing as a Lived, Religion of Nature

Samuel Snyder

Fly fishers around the world frequently use terms such as religious, spiritual, sacred, divine, ritual, meditation, and conversion to describe their personal angling experiences. Further, drawing upon religious terminology, anglers will refer to rivers as their church and to nature as sacred. Often these latter pronouncements drive a concern for the conservation of these sacred spaces as evidenced by participation in both local and national conservation organizations. Informed by theoretical perspectives offered by religious studies, particularly “lived religion” and “religion and nature,” I shall trace a few of the historical, material, and everyday elements of fly fishers and their subcultures, demonstrating along the way the insights that come by understanding fly fishing as a religious practice, which can, at times, drive an ethic of environmental conservation.

REFLECTING ON RELIGION AND FLY FISHING, Tom McGuane wrote that “humans have suspected” their connection “for

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thousands of years” (McGuane 1999: xiv). In the book *A River Runs Through It*, Norman Maclean’s family held that very suspicion, believing there existed “no clear line between fishing and religion” (Maclean 1976: 1). Although Maclean connected fly fishing to Christianity, other fly fishers often perceive fly fishing itself as a religious or spiritual activity. John Randolph, the long-time editor of *Fly Fisherman*, fly fishing’s premier magazine, does not hesitate to call fly fishing a religion and in doing so, he cites a popular statistic that not only is it a sport practiced by several million people, but that Sir Izaak Walton’s *The Compleat Angler: Or The Contemplative Man’s Recreation* since its publication in 1653, has ranked third as the most printed text in the English language, behind the *Holy Bible* and *Pilgrim’s Progress* (Paxman 1996; Raines 1996: xiii; Schullery 1999: 12; Randolph 2002: ix, 233).

Beyond statistics, however, fly fishers around the world frequently describe their experiences of fishing through the use of terms such as religious, spiritual, sacred, divine, ritual, meditation, and conversion. Further, drawing upon religious terminology, fly fishers will refer to rivers as their church and to nature as sacred. Often these latter pronouncements drive a concern for the conservation of said sacred spaces as evidenced by participation in local and national conservation organizations.

As the introduction to these articles on aquatic nature religion suggests, scholars can take seriously such cultural constructions by fly fishers and consider fly fishing as a religious practice; so do the growing fields of “lived religion,” and “religion and ecology,” or “religion and nature.” In their own ways, these fields seek to illuminate the ways in which religion relates to, constructs, and shapes the human to nature relationships in everyday practice, and they all thereby are relevant not only to questions of popular religion, but also to issues of environmental sustainability. Informed by such perspectives, I shall trace the historical, material, and everyday elements of fly fishers and their subcultures,¹ demonstrating along the way the insights that come by understanding fly fishing as a religious practice and fly fishing subcultures as having a strong, spiritual dimension, which can, at times, drive an ethic of environmental conservation.

¹ In order to explore these watersheds of sport and religion, I make use of quotes and comments offered by anglers through interviews and on internet chat forums. Those anglers quoted here, a selection of a much larger interview sample collected through fieldwork, represent a wide spectrum of skills and devotion to the sport of fly fishing and involvement in conservation. Some quoted are relative newcomers to the sport whereas others have fished their entire lives, have children who are members of the U.S. Fly Fishing Team, and are lifetime guides in their respective states. The diversity of sources is meant to reveal the commonality of themes under study.

CASTING RELIGION

Over the last decade or so scholars have increasingly turned their attention to topics not traditionally considered religious. Scholars such as David Chidester and Robert Orsi have pushed scholars to expand their purview of inquiries into global manifestations of religion (Chidester 1987: 4, 1996: 760, 2005; Orsi 1997). Indeed, many have responded by examining a host of topics from economics to radical environmentalism and rave culture (Taylor 1995, 2001a, 2001b; Loy 1997; St John 2003). Rebecca Gould combined fields of “lived religion” and “nature religion,” for example, to study contemporary practices of homesteading in Vermont as “lived religions of nature” (Gould 2005). As a result of broadening definitional criteria, Gould stated, “religion has been ‘relocated’ from the fixed definitions of former models of method and theory of the study of religion (7).”²

In similar ways to Chidester’s recent work on religion and popular culture in America, Gould’s analyses of homesteading highlighted the importance of shifting scholarship into new realms of inquiry, de-emphasizing strict definitions of religion in order to underscore “the ways in which problems of meaning are worked out by those who construct the sacred and profane, the religious and spiritual in particular ways” (Gould 2005: 9). By illuminating the complexity and contradictions of religious and cultural behavior, both Gould and Chidester, in similar ways, make statements about how scholars “do” studies of American religious life (Gould 2005: 10).

One such subfield of religious studies, which has been rethinking how we “do” scholarship on religion, is that of “lived religion,” where targets of inquiry have expanded to more broadly include, as Orsi argued, those “places where humans make something of the worlds they have found themselves thrown into” (Orsi 1997: 6). Formerly, religion remained relegated to churches, synagogues, or specifically demarcated ritual areas. Today, however, scholars are more frequently relocating religion from formal structures to spaces, such as nature, in ways which allow one to consider the lives of anglers, for example, as equally valid loci of religious practice. Further, as Orsi and others have demonstrated, practitioners, regardless of experience or whether they held formal authority, can provide useful lenses for scholars to

² Here, Gould is specifically referring to the work of Mircea Eliade, to whom she responded that she is “less interested in fixed locations of the sacred or essential definitions of religion and more interested in the ways in which problems of meaning are worked out by those who construct the sacred and profane, the religious and spiritual, in particular ways” (Gould 2005: 7).

investigate contemporary manifestations of religious life. Such practitioners utilize a combination of personal subjectivity, historical tradition, and community support in order to create and relate to what they perceive as religious spaces of the sacred. Following Orsi, religion arises where humans act in “subtle, intimate, and quotidian” ways that make meaning “known and verified,” for both individuals and groups (6). In other words, religion is quite simply a “meaning making activity” (Orsi 1997: 6; Albanese 1999: 6–11).

In a parallel way, Haig-Brown said the same thing of fly fishing calling it a “meaning making activity” (Haig-Brown 1975: 222). Further, Charles Long noted that religion often comprises or creates opportunities by which people orient themselves to the world (Long 1999: 7). Anglers repetitively speak of fly fishing as the ways by which they find orientation or meaning in their lives. On a recent internet forum, “Fred51” described how fly fishing keeps him “oriented in a world so disorienting,” and how fly fishing connects him with “what is real and essential.”³ Catherine Albanese also emphasized the orienting aspects of religion which arise by “taking note of where boundaries are and placing oneself in relation to them” (Albanese 1990: 11). One of the few scholars of English Literature to tackle fly fishing as an academic topic, Mark Browning, in *Haunted by Waters: Fly Fishing in North American Literature*, argued a central motif in fly fishing literature comes through the negotiation of the boundaries between ordinary and extraordinary experience through the practices of fly casting, by which the angler aims to reach, or cast, into unseen, extraordinary worlds of nature (Browning 1998: 12).

By creating meaning and negotiating boundaries, religion consists of more than structure of thought or doctrine, but entails elements of action through modes of expression, motivation, intention, behavior, and style. Some scholars might object that such broad and inclusive definitions run the risk of reducing the analytic value of religion, as a concept, by making the term applicable to anything. But, religion functions beyond the walls of institutions and traditional categories. The broadening of definitional criteria for religion is especially evident in the conversational circles surrounding religion, nature, and environmental ethics.

Particularly important in religion and nature conversations is the category of “nature religion,” which can be considered an aspect or

³ Fred51, “Why do you fly fish?” Available at www.winstonrods.com/forum/Forum=5&Topic=720. Accessed on 18 December 2005.

trajectory of lived religion. According to Albanese in *Nature Religion in America*, nature religion refers to the positioning of nature as a symbolic resource through which humans orient themselves toward the sacred (Albanese 1991: 11). It is important to note under Albanese's definition, nature need not be considered sacred, although it can be. In contrast, through his work on radical environmentalism and other forms of nature religion, Bron Taylor has identified a common-denominator spirituality that usually involves experiences and perceptions of connection and belonging to a living, sacred earth (Taylor 1995, 2001a, 2001b; 2002, 2005). Taylor noted how people and groups often turn to nature "for wisdom, strength, for maturation, for spiritual comradeship, and for lessons in devotion and humility" (2001a: 181). Fly fishing culture seems to fit well in his nature religion model, as a mode of spirituality or religious practice based upon "being-in-nature," where nature provides solace, strength, wisdom, and humility, and is often conceived of as sacred and deserving reverence, care, and conservation.

Similarly, in his social science queries into nature-based religions, Stephen Kellert has demonstrated how many who do not attend religious services understand nature to be a site where one might encounter the divine, or tap into something "greater," thereby providing "meaning making" or "world orienting" moments where nature is the holy or sacred space of religious practice (Kellert and Berry 1980). On an angling internet forum, a man, when asked why one fishes, replied, "Not to steer this conversation in a religious direction, but I've felt more in touch with God on a river, than I've ever felt standing in a church."⁴ His point is repeatedly made in various ways and venues in fly fishing culture.

Paradoxically, although fly fishing maintains an increasingly global community, the religious experiences involved in fly fishing are often described in the context of the individual. As one fly fisher, Benjamin Casarez, stated in an interview, "Even when fishing twenty feet from your best buddy, the experience of fishing, catching and landing fish is always individual." Casarez continued after a pause, "However, knowing and seeing your fishing buddy there certainly adds to the entire experience, without him or her there, it would not be quite the same."⁵ On the subject of the "fishing buddy," famed fly fishing author and activist David James Duncan mused the "best gift a fly fisher can offer his

⁴ Wading Tall, "Why do you fly fish?" Available at www.winstonrods.com/forum/Forum=5&Topic=720. Accessed on 18 December 2005.

⁵ Interview with Benjamin Casarez, 14 September 2006.

partner” is to head in opposite directions of each other with the anticipation of sharing stories at the end of the day (Duncan 2005).

Even though fly fishing’s religious experiences are individual, they are always reflected upon in the company, language, history, and literary legacy of a community of believers often associated with “an ancient religious order” (Browning 1998: 55). Fly fishing, then, like religion for Durkheim, entails experiences of the individual variety verified in the contexts of a “conscious collective” (Durkheim 1972: 146). Only in this community of believers do fly fishers believe that they can retrace moments on religious waters, seeking to make sense of the experiences and activities of piscatorial meaning making. Sounding as if he were echoing Taylor’s discussions of nature religion, Duncan noted how the sought communal connections often extend beyond the self and fishing buddy to the natural world, to the very “wind, rivers, rocks, trees, birds, and of course fish” with whom the fly fisher hopes to merge through the practice. By communing with nature through fly fishing, Duncan continued, fly fishers hope to “catch a ride our souls can keep riding forever” (Duncan 2005).

CREEK-SIDE CONVERSIONS

The metaphor of “ride” there is telling. Fly fishers often describe the early moments of connecting to nature via angling in terms of conversion experiences in which their souls, as Duncan ruminated, catch an eternal “ride.” In a recent article on steelhead fishing, Lani Waller described catching his first rainbow trout on a fly rod as an “‘amorphous gestalt,’ a mysterious blend of vague yet powerful signals, which came from an unknown and distant source.” This moment “of revelation” in 1949, Waller continued, thoroughly immersed him into a life devoted to fly fishing (Waller 2006: 53).

Anglers often describe their conversions to a new fly casting religion of nature as if they were baptized and born again. Fly fishers often insist that fishing provides more than the occasion to catch fish, but opportunities to “approach to a web of relations that give shape and coherence to the natural world” (Leeson 1994: 3). In a recent interview, one New Mexico fly fisher recounted that learning about bugs and aquatic life, more than catching fish, caused him to “sell all my spin fishing gear and switch addictively to fly fishing.” “Fly fishing forces you to understand bugs, fish habitat, and life cycles,” he reflected, and “therefore connect more deeply with nature and God.” “You know,” he told me,

I saw the cycles of life. Looking at insects and becoming an amateur entomologist, looking at life cycles. I felt so close to God. *You cannot fly fish and not believe in a higher power*, I truly believe that. You would be a fool to think that this was some random act of events that makes all that process take place. To see a mayfly as a nymph, turn into a fly, mate and die to feed trout. That trout can take advantage of this wonder, and acts of God. That is about where I get it.⁶

When making such proclamations on the power of fly fishing to connect the angler to nature, fly fishers, like other religious devotees, draw upon a lengthy literary tradition for support, inspiration, and credence.

LITERARY LEGACY

It has been said by fly fishers that fly fishing is one of the most literary of outdoor sports. Professor of English literature Mark Browning wrote, “although outdoor sports have generated a considerable literature, far more than half of that writing is centered not on the land, but on the aquatic hunt, fishing” (Browning 1998: 20). Fishing, Leonard Wright, an angling author himself, bragged, “has produced a library that dwarfs any other sport, and the fly fishing sections of these shelves contain the vast majority of quality books” (Wright 1990: 11). According to Browning, fly fishing’s esteemed literary tradition creates a space for fishing to act as “at least an active metaphor for religion and spiritual life” (12). One cannot stress enough the profound influence this creative literature has had on fly fishing culture. Izaak Walton, Ernest Hemingway, his daughter Lorian, Aldo Leopold, David James Duncan, and Maclean are but a few of the iconic figures in an increasingly long list of fishing literati.⁷ Quoting, and adding to, famed author Sparse Grey Hackle, Arnold Gingrich, a fly fishing writer himself, stated, “Some of the best fishing around is to be found not in water but in print. It follows that some of the best fishing partners are to be found not in life but in literature” (Gingrich 1974: 1). If these authors are skilled with the fly rod, they are even more skilled with the pen.

Fly fishing’s literary tradition certainly builds on the larger canon of American nature writing, which according to the scholar of English literature John Gatta (2004) provided an archetypal path for reflecting on

⁶ Interview with Jeff Franchell in Albuquerque, New Mexico, 21 June 2006.

⁷ While it is not in the scope of this paper, it is worth noting the debates surrounding the fly fisher’s tendency to celebrate and claim many authors of this tradition as their own. As historian Paul Schullery noted, Hemingway and Walton all fished in other manners than just fly fishing. For a thorough treatment of this debate, see Schullery (1999, 2000, 2006a, 2006b).

“pursuits of self-transcendence” in nature’s forests, fields, river valleys, and mountains (1). If Taylor and Albanese highlighted the role of nature as a source of the sacred in nature religions, Gatta emphasized a primary mode of reflection on sacred nature that emerged through the romantic writings of Muir and Thoreau or the more contemporary engagements of Aldo Leopold, Anne Dillard, or Gary Snyder. Writers and readers of fly fishing literature often draw upon and identify, with this larger tradition of American nature writing, which, Gatta rightly noted, is pivotal for understanding how Americans in particular have reflected upon the sacred potential of nature.

Maclean is one of the most faithfully recited authors in the realm of fly fishing; no fishing text is more historically celebrated than Sir Izaak Walton’s *The Compleat Angler: Or The Contemplative Man’s Recreation*. As noted, since its publication in 1653, it has ranked third as the most printed text in the English language, behind the *Holy Bible* and *Pilgrim’s Progress* (Paxman 1996; Raines 1998: xiii; Schullery 1999: 12; Randolph 2002: 233). Although many contemporary fly fishing authors do not embrace Christianity, Browning and others have rightly insisted none can deny the Christian legacy in fly fishing’s literary tradition, noting in particular the Christian ideal of Jesus being “fishers of men” (Browning 1998: 17). Browning’s claim mirrors Gatta’s emphasis on the ways Christianity “has most deeply affected” the language and expression of American nature writing (Gatta 2004: 7). Fly fishing’s Christian legacy, in particular, dates at least back to the highly celebrated Walton and a nun by the name of Dame Juliana Berners, around whom controversy swirls.

According to some, Walton plagiarized his work from a fifteenth-century text attributed to Berners, *A Treatise on Fishing with an Angle* ([c1421]1991). Uncertainty as to whether Berners truly existed only complicates the controversy.⁸ Berners, however, is not the only author from whom Walton is thought to have drawn inspiration, or directly borrowed material. Historians, such as Schullery or Thomas Harrison,

⁸ Holly Morris, in an introduction to *A Treatise on Fishing with an Angle*, discussed the controversy surrounding the authorship of *A Treatise*. “There has been spirited debate about her authorship, and some cases about her existence.” Nonetheless, Morris stated, “Dame Juliana’s standing as an angling heroine endures, and she remains the first and best known female figure in five centuries of angling lore and history” (Morris 1991: 96). Berner’s legacy appears to grow more celebrated as more women join the sport and devote their energies to writing about it. For example, the copy of *A Treatise on Fishing with an Angle* used for this essay appears in a volume of collected writings by women on fishing entitled *Uncommon Waters: Women Write About Fishing* (Morris 1991). This is one of many books by women about women and fishing. Schullery, Harrison (1979a, 1979b), among many others have vigorously explored the actual existence of Berners while noting the importance of her legacy, real, or mythological, to the fly fishing history and identity.

point out the similarities between the *Arte of Angling* (1577), which is believed to have been written by William Samuel, as well as John Denney's *Secrets of Angling* (1613) and that of Berners Walton. These are but a few of texts which historians use to explore the literature surrounding Walton's literary legacy.

Further, Schullery has reminded readers that Walton was hardly a fly fisher, if at all; but instead fished in any means possible necessary for catching fish. The fly fishing portions of the *Compleat Angler* were added later by Charles Cotton to the 1676 edition of Walton's text; yet, fly fishers celebrate Walton as if his success were somehow directly related to fly fishing (Schullery 1999; 2000; 2006b). Tracing this historical lineage surrounding both Walton and Berners, Schullery has noted how such historical debates provide powerful mythological foundations among its most faithful practitioners, while keeping open the possibility of even earlier texts of literary origins, "leading hopeful anglers on fantasy explorations" of archives, in search of some undiscovered text, just as fly fishers seek the undiscovered stream (Schullery 1999: 40).

Fly fishing's literary tradition has produced two primary, yet highly overlapping and mutually supporting, genres: instructional and inspirational. Inspiration, of course, also provides a basis for instruction. Instructional texts operate as ritual manuals that explain approaches, techniques for casting or tying flies, secrets of certain locations, rivers, and regions known for quality angling opportunities. Inspirational texts, on the other hand, offer opportunities for anglers to reminisce and relive moments on waters in search of trout and in commune with nature.

As a primary *modus operandi* of fly fishing nature religion, the storytelling tradition goes beyond the simple telling of exploits to the singing of praises of nature, fish, and sport, not unlike the American nature writing tradition, while teaching lessons, ethics, and reflecting on the divine potential of nature (Hammond 1992: 225). Sociologist Bryn Hammond likened the storytelling tradition in fly fishing to the power of storytelling and narrative in the world's religious traditions. In the end, he compared the writing and telling of fish stories with that of catechism (Hammond 1994: 226) or as Browning noted, in reference to Hammond, "all those involved come to the words fully aware that nothing new is forthcoming, yet remain faithfully attendant to their repetition and variation" (Browning 1998: 201). Stories, like fishing, work through repetition; this aids the angler in, as Orsi says of religion, making something of the worlds they have found themselves thrown into. No one expresses this more clearly than David James Duncan, who wrote,

When the trout are happening, I can kneel on merciless stones *happily*, for hours and hours; I can stare into blinding glare, withstand heat or cold, be chased by bears, cow moose with calves, or redder necks than my own, and still rush gratefully back for more. I don't understand the *why* of all this. I don't try to understand. I just pull on my waders and merge via a spirituality so thrashing, splashing, cursing, casting, and Earth-engaged it doesn't feel spiritual at all: it just feeds the spirit (Duncan 2002: 303, italics his).

Fishing writing, done well, takes the angling reader into the magical moments of fishing and into a world of connections and wholeness, where more than fish are caught; where meaning is created, and a bit of world orientation is gained.

Further, fishing stories, both written and read, provide the common thread through which fly fishers understand and identify themselves, connecting them to a broad community and shared historical heritage. As Anna Peterson noted in *Being Human: Ethics, Environment, and Our Place in the World*, the social life of religious communities are always bound up in narrative and stories. "Only in light of stories," according to Peterson, "can people come to understand themselves, the multiple roles they play, and the origins and trajectories of their communities" (Peterson 2001: 18). Therefore, even when re-telling tales of individual experience or reading a book in solitude, the fly fisher is always participating in an ongoing story of that community's collective conscious. Further, as Peterson noted, stories offer equally powerful vehicles for understanding and reflecting on a community's relationship to the natural world, hence the reason she celebrates them as a necessary tools for environmental ethicists.

HOLY WATER

In "Nature and Sacrament," Paul Tillich urged Christians to revitalize natural elements as sacramental realities. "The power and meaning of nature," he insisted "must be sought within and through its objective physical structures" (Tillich 1957: 101). Water is just such a physical structure, into which baptism not only offers opportunities for purification, but also a more embodied connection to the physical reality of the divine. As if they were reading Tillich, fly fishers elevate water as the most holy symbol next to the fish itself, equating wading into rivers to a form of self-induced baptism.

Through its heightened perceptions of water, fly fishing shares a great deal in common with the history of the world's religions through

their celebration of rivers, streams, and water. Just as Christians pilgrimage to the holy springs of Lourdes, France, and Hindus pilgrimage to bathe in the waters of the Ganges, fly fishers make “ceremonial journeys” to gain the opportunity to cast a line, wet their feet, and touch the fish of famed rivers, including Utah’s Green, Montana’s Big Blackfoot, and Argentina’s Rio Grande de la Tierra del Fuego (McGuane 1999: xii).

Despite the celebration of certain rivers around the world, anglers just as frequently turn to the small streams and waters in their own bioregions. In many ways, some feel the small unknown, local streams, devoid of pilgrims, provide the greatest opportunities for connective, spiritual, and religious moments. For example, John Gierach made clear that the most sacred stream to him is the St Vrain, a stream in his backyard that spans no more than thirty feet across.

Most fishermen I know—even those who think of themselves as Sportsmen with a capital S—have a creek like this somewhere in their lives. It’s not big, it’s not great, it’s not famous, certainly it’s not fashionable, and therein lies the charm. It’s an ordinary, run-of-the-mill trout stream where fly fishing can be a casual affair rather than having to be balls-to-the-wall adventure all the time. It’s the place where, for once, you are *not* the tourist (Gierach 2005: 184).

Gierach often argues, as these words demonstrate, that for many anglers it is not the gear, the river, nor the size of the trout that matter, but rather, it is the opportunities to commune with nature in solitude that constitute the bedrock for the religious and spiritual perceptions that can come with fly fishing.

MORE THAN MATERIALITY, MORE THAN FISH

As Gierach indicates, beyond history and materiality, anglers perpetually assert that they primarily seek an opportunity to stand in a river, meditatively cast a line, and commune with nature. Herbert Hoover once argued, “next to prayer, fishing is the most personal relationship of man.” Anglers around the world agree with Hoover that fishing is a chance to “wash one’s soul with pure air, with the rush of the brook, or with the shimmer of the sun on the blue water,” who also instead that with this practice, “is not so much getting fish as it is a state of mind and a lure for the human soul into refreshment” (Hoover 1963: 76, 11, 30).

A New Mexico angler named Gus revealed similar sentiments during an interview when he stated that fly fishing is meditative, spiritual, and refreshing. Fly fishing, he commented, “re-creates the soul,” and for him, this is what made it religious: “Fly fishing provides a release of stress and things. It’s spiritual; it is a lot of different things. When I am fly fishing it is not about fish, it is about where I am and what I am doing. It allows me to step outside myself. That is refreshing!”⁹

As noted by Gus and echoed by many others, fly fishing represents more than catching fish. According to Harry Middleton in *The Earth is Enough: Growing Up in a World of Fly Fishing, Trout, and Old Men*, fly fishing creates situations and opportunities for anglers to bind themselves to something greater, primarily nature (Middleton 1989: 57). These sentiments recall what some speculate reflect the etymological root of the term religion, “religio,” or “religare”—“to tie or bind” (Smith 1998: 269; Chidester 2005: 75; Esposito et al., 2006: 6).

According to Browning, fly fishers might insist that they fish to make contact with the ineffable, to reach into the “unseen and draw out life,” and in turn, perceive “angling as a means toward the divine” (Browning 1998: 20). Ted Leeson, in *Habit of Rivers*, passionately reflected that “Trout streams tug at the mind with an insistent, contradictory pull, presenting both a plain and perfect simplicity and a subtle link to sources of *hidden significance*” (Leeson 1994: 1–2). David James Duncan unabashedly pushed the borders of religious mysticism, in agreement with Leeson and Browning, by stating, “When I fish, I fish to hook into an *entirety*.¹⁰ I fish to trade self-consciousness for creek consciousness and self-awareness for rise-awareness” (Duncan 2001: 203). Although these words are those of famous angling authors, streamside conversations, bar-stool babblings, and fly shop stories reveal wholehearted agreement with such sentiments. Anglers, then, in literature and life, often seek experiences which represent essential quests for meaning in the lives of all humans; anglers simply perform these quests on streams, rivers, and lakes while ritually waving a wand in the air; and it is the “wand” or fly rod that is essential for defining fly fishers and mediating practice.

⁹ Interview with Gus Gustafson, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 20 June 2006.

¹⁰ Some readers have taken this to mean “eternity.” However, reading the term as “entirety,” as it is printed, I have assumed Duncan referred to the powers of fly fishing to connect, or “hook,” into the entire cosmos. In other words, this term reflects a holistic mysticism which Duncan often describes when contemplating the human relationship to nature.

RODS AND RITUAL

The material relics—fly rods, reels, and clothing—more than literature, as Colleen McDannell says of material Christianity, “signal visually who is in the group and who is not” (McDannell 1995: 45). The material goods of fly fishing not only bind individuals to the sacred, but also bind them to each other operating as evidence and indicators of commitment to a particular religious community.

Contemporary theories of religious studies demonstrate the importance of close attention to material signals of devotion and community involvement for comprehending the myriad of ways that religious devotees negotiate the boundaries of religious worlds. Material elements of culture permit one to “decipher the meanings of religious life” (McDannell 1995: 2). Studying material objects, McDannell opined, allows the scholar to understand “how the faithful perpetuate their religion day in and day out” in ways that demonstrate the complicated relationships between the sacred and profane (2–3). McDannell, like Gould, uses material elements of religion to “relocate religion” from the static hierophanies of Eliade (1959). Further, as much as she wants to demonstrate how humans create the sacred, she takes a rather anti-Durkheimian approach by insisting that American Christians experience a radical separation of the sacred from the profane. If we look at what Christians do rather than at what they think, we cannot help but notice the continual “*scrambling of the sacred and the profane*” (4). In fly fishing culture, through magazines, media, film, and material practice, one finds an equal amount of “scrambling.”

Therefore, like other forms of religious and spiritual practice, the “gear” matters in fly fishing, opening up interesting doors for an examination of fly fishing and religion along the lines of consumption. One receives magazines, newsletters, e-mails, and pamphlets on a weekly basis encouraging the angler to purchase the newest tool for “reaching nirvana” (Orvis 2005: 1). These accoutrements visibly signal group membership and participation. As one angler stated in reference to a hat on my head, “Oh, you belong to the church of Sage.”¹¹

Beyond capital consumption, however, the tools of fly fishing always affect the angler sensually. Flies, reels, waders, vests, and ideally, an old, worn oilcloth raincoat stir the imagination by titillating multiple senses. In doing so, they become more than simple tools of the art, with the

¹¹ Sage is a popular brand of fly fishing rod. Ironically, although I have a hat manufactured by Sage, I do not own any rods made by that company. I wear it for two reasons: it is comfortable and its well-worn nature signals my long involvement in the fishing community.

power to affect the angler away from the water as much as on the water. The sensuality of fly fishing experience rises with the aroma wafting upward upon the opening of the storage tube to a bamboo cane rod or the unpacking of the oilcloth coat. These smells spark the angler's memory in ways similar to fishing's inspirational literature, where the angler imagines past and future moments on the river through the printed words on the page.

Of all ritual and material aspects, the fly casting process provides fly fishing its distinctive nature and appeal. Former president of the American Museum of Fly Fishing Paul Schullery commented, "Fly fishing has over several centuries gathered around itself a mystique, an aroma of almost magical sophistication, that causes it to attract or repel prospective participants more intensely than other types of fishing" (1). Much of this aura, Schullery and others have noted, is inherently tied to the process of fly casting itself. In a recent interview, when I asked a New Mexico fly fisher why he thought fly fishing had such a mystique, for example, he promptly related that it all has to do with the process of fly casting itself, particularly "after Brad Pitt's character made fly casting seem so elegant in 'that movie.'"¹²

In "that movie," *A River Runs Through It*, Maclean's father taught him and his brother that fly casting is an art performed in a four-count rhythm between ten and two o'clock. His point here is that like any other form of meditation, fly casting requires time, focus, and repetition. The view of rod, line, and motion of casting as vehicle of meditation permeates the cannon of fly fishing literature and culture. Like meditation, fly casting operates as the ritual practice allowing the angler to transcend into the sacred, or pass from the realm of the ordinary into the extraordinary. As Christopher Camuto remarked, "In all of its variants, the backward-seeming effort of casting a fly line, is an attempt to reach into the natural world and confirm its sustaining presence in the lives of men" (Camuto 1990: 234). Building on these perceptions, many anglers view the process of fly casting as a primary mode of connecting to nature in search of opportunities for the creation of meaning, orientation, and confirmation of the "sustaining presence" on rivers and in life.

¹² Interview with Bill Frangos, Albuquerque, New Mexico, June 23, 2006. Fly fishers often refer to the film version of *A River Runs Through It* as "that movie" or "that damn movie," particularly in response to the profound impact it had on the sport's popularity over the past twenty years. Many fly fishers, who fished before the release of the film, resent the explosion of popularity, causing streams to become more crowded with inexperienced and uneducated fly fishers who only want to fish because it was in a Hollywood film.

If fly casting is the ritual process, then the fly rod is the essential ritual tool. Regarding the fly rod, David James Duncan mused in the film *TroutGrass*,

On a river without a fly rod I am a tourist; with rod in hand I become something else. A rod extends a fly fisher's being as surely do imagination, empathy, and prayer. Within the eighty or so feet of our cast we gain this crazy ability to pierce the river's power of concealment, bringing life that would otherwise remain hidden right up to our hands (Duncan 2005).

Angling author Middleton similarly reflected, "whatever the angler's skill, the fly rod is an outstanding companion, a welcome conversationalist, because it speaks not in words but in motion and energy" (Middleton 1989: 68). Middleton thought so highly of the fly rod as a young boy that he perceived the purchase of his first fly rod to be the purchase of his "ticket to heaven" (91). Throughout their writings, Duncan, Middleton, and many others express sentiments common within Earth- and nature-based religions through their own celebrations of the mystical powers of the fly rod as teacher of patience, connector to nature, and "ticket to heaven."

Like the history of angling literature, fly fishers celebrate the historical elements of bamboo fly rods, which they conceive connects them to the larger historical community of angling. Because all bamboo for these majestic rods comes from a single location, the southern forests of China, those who fish with bamboo perceive links to that very history. In *A River Runs Through It*, Maclean ruminated that in the end "all things merge into one and a river runs through it" (Maclean 1976: 104). According to Duncan in the film *TroutGrass*, the river running through the entire tradition of fly fishing is China's Sui, down which all bamboo shoots must drift on their way toward exportation and transformation into split cane rods.

Bamboo rod builder Glenn Brackett believes this historical tradition, then, embeds every rod with the spirits of fly fishing's forefathers, not to mention the spirits of China's forests (Duncan 2005). The miles each shoot of bamboo has traveled, combined with the multitude of hands touching the bamboo from harvest to rod completion, not to mention the "unseen hands" growing the bamboo in the forests of China, as Brackett noted, all infuse the bamboo with multiple spirits and combine to tell a story of many lives perpetually involved in its history. Comments such as these are quite common in fly fishing culture and echo the theoretical lineage of religious studies from Tylor's discussions

of animism to contemporary scholar of religion Stewart Guthrie, who insisted that the essence of religion is to be found in the anthropomorphizing of the non-human world (Guthrie 1993). Anglers anthropomorphize everything from rods, to flies, to fish. If Guthrie's definition of religion is correct, then, fly fishing fits the mold.

Regardless of rod choice, anglers often speak of the fly rod as the very means for the perpetuation of their faith. The religious elements surrounding the fly rod include its perception as a primary tool in meditative, patience-teaching casting. Without the fly rod, anglers doubt they could ever connect to the natural world in such life-sustaining, world orienting ways. With regard to the bamboo rod, many anglers believe its natural qualities, in comparison with synthetic graphite, create the most authentic and pure means of mystically connecting to nature (Gierach 1997).

IMITATION AND ELITISM

A primary mode of angling-related anthropomorphizing emerges in the form of tiny fake flies, from which the tradition of fly fishing derives its name. With these fake flies, anglers seek to reach into the natural world by imitative attempts to mimic the processes of nature by drifting flies down the river. In Duncan's film *Thomas McGuane* likened this process to a ritual dance of puppets (Duncan 2005). If properly performed, fish will rise to the fly and close the connective gap between anglers, fish, and nature.

The most devoted of anglers tie their own flies, believing that such an activity brings them one step closer to the natural processes they seek to imitate in their search for fish. As the renowned fly tier and author of *Guide to Aquatic Foods* Dave Whitlock insisted, "There are no higher pleasures in outdoor sport than the challenge and reward of catching beautiful wild trout on flies you have made to match specific trout foods" (Whitlock 1992: 1). If fly fishing has saints, Browning argued, it is those who have devised the patterns most successful at matching nature, to which sainthood is bestowed.

As noted, when casting flies, fly fishers aspire to present the perfect offering to the fish, in ways similar to a devotee of a particular deity, in hopes that the deity or fish will respond to the offering. Anglers often speak of the joy of seeing the fish's eye peak out of the water as it rises to the fly. Again, anglers rarely shy from animistic perceptions of fish, which they understand to contain the agency and action from whom the angler feels blessed to receive communal contact.

Although all flies aim to lure in fish, the dry fly is the one most celebrated. According to Randall Kauffman, in his instructional book

Tying Dry Flies, “the *dry fly* is a general term that denotes a fly that is fished on top of the water or more in the air than in the water” (Kauffman 2001: 10). In order to lure fish, the angler uses a dry fly with the hopes of imitating adult forms of caddisflies, mayflies, stoneflies, beetles, grasshoppers, and other winged creatures which make their homes along the water’s edge. In comparison with other flies, which might be fished submerged below the water’s surface, anglers celebrate the dry fly because they can visually watch the fish rise out of the water to snatch the bug.

Typically anglers perceive dry fly fishing to be more technical and difficult, which leads them to position those who primarily fish in this manner among the top of an angling hierarchy. In his insightful history of American fly fishing, Paul Schullery noted, significant snobbery has been attached to the dry fly by its practitioners, as if these particular anglers perceived themselves to be the Brahmin of the angling world (Schullery 1999: 109). Anglers who espouse such perceptions sound eerily like religious fundamentalists insisting on religious purity, tradition, and going “by the book.”

Even for less fundamentalist fly fishers, fly fishing culture still defines itself in relation to other forms of fishing, enveloping itself in images of purity and tradition. Even the most open-minded anglers speak of “having converted,” or “passed through an important phase” as a “worm drowner” or “hardware flinger” (Schullery 1999: 247). A recent interview in Albuquerque, New Mexico provided this statement on such conversion.

I had bait dragged pretty much my whole life and my dad was a bait dragger and spin fisher. A buddy showed up when I was 15, he was 16 and had a car. We went up to the Jemez [River]. I took my spinning rod with worms and he took his fly rod and started turning over rocks and looking for bugs. I was drowning worms, he was catching fish and I was not so I borrowed his rod and caught my first trout on a stonefly. We were up on the Guadalupe River during the famous stonefly hatch. That was it, man. I took my spin fishing gear... I sold all my equipment, bought fly gear and never turned back.¹³

As these comments demonstrate, fly fishers, even the converted, perceive themselves atop an angling hierarchy.

For many fly fishers, the perceived cultural superiority comes from a belief that the necessary knowledge of bug life, fish behavior, casting

¹³ Interview, Jeff Franchell, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 20 June 2006.

methods, tools and cost of fly fishing, accompanying literary tradition, or natural elements of imitation that more “authentically” allow the fly fisher to pierce the natural world and connect to nature (Browning 1998: 138; Schullery 1999: 248). Jeff Franchell of Albuquerque, quoted above, certainly saw his conversion in part due to a newly discovered knowledge of sub-aquatic life, through his friend’s turning over of rocks. Fly fishing, he and others believe, fosters or encourages this knowledge better than other forms of fishing.

Further, because a fly fisher must, as Franchell noted, have “at least rudimentary knowledge of streamside biology,” fly fishers reason fly fishing is more likely to foster a concern for the natural environment. Luca Adelfio, an employee of Trout Unlimited (TU), fly fishing’s largest conservation group which I discuss later, told me that fly fishing provides opportunities for understanding the complexities of nature. This “knowledge and understanding naturally should lead to greater concern for and action toward conservation efforts.”¹⁴ Therefore, based on greater concern and contribution to conservation, fly fishers might also situate themselves atop a hierarchy based on ethics or conservation.

While these sorts of hierarchal attitudes permeate fly fishing culture, they are also criticized from within. Taylor Streit, a renowned Taos, New Mexico fly fishing guide and author, for example, recently chastised such elitist perceptions as “shameful displays of egos” which give fly fishing a “black eye.”¹⁵ Tom McGuane asserted similarly, “we really ought to get together;” expressing his perception that conservation efforts would be much more effective without the divisions and hierarchies (McGuane 1999: xv). Streit continued that the sport should not foster egos particularly if we are concerned about conservation and preservation of trout, streams, and watersheds.

CASTING FOR CONSERVATION

Because many fly fishers praise their tradition for the occasions it provides for them to connect to nature, they will contend that these connections often lead them to be concerned about environmental degradation. When asked if fly fishing leads one to pay attention to the “health” or “state” of the environment, one angler emotionally replied, “Well of course. Being out there on a stream over the years, you notice changes from stream degradation to water loss.”¹⁶ Another angler

¹⁴ Telephone Interview, Luca Adelfio, 21 May 2006.

¹⁵ Interview with Taylor Streit, Taos, New Mexico, 9 July 2006.

¹⁶ Interview, Jeff Franchell in Albuquerque, New Mexico, 21 June 2006.

replied more broadly, "If you enjoy the environment in any way, you cannot help but support organizations and take care of it when you are out there."¹⁷ Fly fishers often agree, then, that they must sustain the rivers that sustain them through conservation practices. One often finds the fly fishing conservation ethic and practice rooted in religious or spiritual concepts. Browning stated, "Just as a religious devotee, having accepted certain doctrine will be expected to behave in an appropriate manner," the fly angler should be expected to embrace certain values and qualities (Browning 1998: 190).¹⁸ As David James Duncan put it, "We must revere the resource" (Duncan 2001: 13). Or, because fly fishing is at "root a nature-based spirituality," Tom McGuane likened environmental protection to a "holy war" (McGuane 1999: xii). All of these sentiments find on-the-ground realization in many grassroots and national fly fishing organizations devoted to the conservation of nature, waters, and piscatorial species.

The largest example of fly-fishing-related conservation organizations is Trout Unlimited (TU), founded in 1959 by several concerned anglers on the banks of the Au Sable River in Grayling, Michigan, which has a current membership of roughly 150,000 members. Over the years, the organization has devoted its energies to youth education, protection and restoration of watersheds, reintroduction of native fish species, and community development and education, all of which totaled in 2004 a "record 461,000 hours of on-the-ground restoration" work (Trout Unlimited 2004: 1). Although TU is the largest and most politically influential fly fishing conservation group, hundreds of other local grassroots organizations complement their efforts.¹⁹ Further, because of national groups such as TU, many local groups receive financial support, political backing, scientific advice, and networking aid, making their efforts more successful in the long run.

Many such fishing groups draw upon religious and spiritual sentiments to urge conservation. In one example, regarding the road-less and anti-drilling protection of an area of New Mexico called the Valle Vidal (which literally means "Valley of Life"), TU Western Coordinator David Stalling stated in a letter to members that the Valle Vidal must be protected because it "has spiritual value" (Stalling 2006). In a local,

¹⁷ Interview, Gus Gustafson in Albuquerque, New Mexico, 21 June 2006.

¹⁸ McDannell stated that material objects of religious community "teach people how to think and act" as they should in the context of that particular community (McDannell 1995: 45).

¹⁹ Others include Federation of Fly Fishers, The Roderick Haig-Brown Institute, or grassroots groups like Cal-Trout in California, or New Mexico Trout. These are but a few of the hundreds of local groups devoted to backyard streams and watersheds.

grass-roots example, the by-laws of New Mexico Trout state that the trout streams of New Mexico must be protected, not only because “Trout waters and their pristine surroundings offer nourishment, solitude, and comfort to the human spirit,” but also because, “trout waters are a gift of nature to be understood, preserved, and protected.”²⁰ These are but two examples of increasing efforts of organizations to preserve and protect fisheries and watersheds based on beliefs in the value of nature, as well as for their importance as for their cultural, religious, and spiritual value.

For many fly fishers, however, protecting or conserving watersheds also entails restoration efforts designed to return areas previously degraded or polluted to a perceived “original” or “pristine” state. The restoration ecologist and bioregionalist Robert Thayer equated the activities of restoration to that of religious ritual which have the power to lead to “social cooperation in place.” (Thayer 2003: 55). Activities of ecological restoration, according to William Jordan III, also a restoration ecologist, resonate with the Durkheimian’s notion of “collective effervescence” through “classic rituals of initiation, communion, and world renewal, providing a new context for accomplishing the ritual work of community making and world building” (Jordan 2003: 71–73). Thayer, Jordan, and many others believe restoration practices have a religious dimension and provide as much community healing as they do environmental.

FINAL CASTS

In *Authentic Fakes: Religion and Popular Culture in America*, Chidester wondered “what difference it makes to call any cultural activity ‘religion?’” Religion, he replied “can be a useful term for understanding the ways in which the transcendent, the sacred, and the ultimate are inevitably drawn into doing some very important things in popular culture: forming a community, focusing human desire, and entering into human relations of exchange” (Chidester 2005: 2). To call fly fishing religion, then, I believe has at least the same analytical value that calling Tupperware and baseball does for Chidester, and more when placed in the context of environmental conservation.

Chidester’s tripartite criteria for religion well describe the practice of fly fishing. First of all, it clearly forms a community based on literary, material, historical, and metaphysical traditions where the community of believers often associate themselves with “an ancient religious order”

²⁰ Website www.newmexicotrout.org/values.htm, 20 July 2006.

(Browning 1998: 55). As a religion of nature, the fly fishing community extends beyond its human participants to include non-human nature. Fly fishers often acknowledge that, as Ted Leeson stated, “To some temperaments, fishing appeals most deeply as an approach to a web of relations that give shape and coherence to the natural world” (Leeson 1994: 3). This web of relations, then, enlarges conceptions of community to the inclusion of rivers, rocks, trees, and fish which fly fishers seek to feel, as Taylor said of Earth- and nature-based spiritualities, “a sense of connection and belonging” (Taylor 2001a, 2001b, 2005).

Second, the fly fishing community “focuses its desire” not only on the catching of fish, but more importantly the engagement of nature in ways that create religious resonances for its members. As Middleton stated about his grandfather and uncle,

The land was not a theory or a principle, it was a belief, their religion, for these two old men surely of the earth, their lives mixed and bound inexorably with it, as tied to it as snugly as a snail fits its shell. Their relationship to those ancient hills was hardly romantic or sentimental. Rather, it was a practical, daily experiment to see of they could take only what they needed in order to partake more fully of what they thrived on, the hills’ natural wildness (Middleton 1989: 57).

The desire to connect to nature in ways that “refresh the soul,” leads fly fishers to continually splash into bodies of water with hope of finding “sources of hidden significance,” moments of making meaning, and world orientation in religious and spiritual ways (Leeson 1994: 2).

Third, the relations of exchange in religious communities of fly fishing extend beyond commercial consumption of fishing gear to relationships of exchange emergent in the pursuit of river restoration and watershed conservation. Interviewed fly fishers often insisted that because the pursuit of fly fishing provides so much more for the angler than simply catching fish, fly fishers should therefore give back to both sport and streams through projects of restoration and watershed conservation. William Jordan III, echoed these angling sentiments in *The Sunflower Forest: Ecological Restoration and the New Communion with Nature*, arguing, “everything we have, we take from nature, sometimes by persuasion or collaboration, sometimes by outright theft. Therefore, the act of restoration is attractive because it offers a way of repaying that debt” (Jordan 2003: 96). Jordan’s point demonstrates a powerful mechanism of exchange in these religiously perceived avenues of popular culture such as fly fishing, where fly fishers sometimes seek to ritually give back to the sources of their nature-based religiosity.

Fly fishing, like surfing and kayaking, is practiced by upwards of several million people around the world, many of whom share these religious sentiments regarding their “re-creation” (Manning 1999; Schullery 1999; Cordell 2003). As noted, therefore if lived religion theory urges scholars to examine daily practices of individuals and communities on the ground, then perhaps we should also be paying attention to what millions of people are doing in and around water.

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