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*Sacred Sands: The Struggle for Community in the Indiana Dunes.* By J. RONALD ENGEL. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1983. 352 pages. \$22.95.

*Sacred Sands* is a welcome contribution at once to religious studies, environmentalism, and American history. J. Ronald Engel narrates a great story, one of the longest and most bitterly contested environmental conflicts in history—the struggle to save the Indiana Dunes, which are adjacent to Chicago on Lake Michigan, from their almost inevitable destruction by the expanding metropolitan area. Nearly a century of conflict between advocates of the public welfare and private industry's trespass and usurpation of the dunes led eventually to the establishment of the Indiana Dune State Park and Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore.

The campaign involved some notable Americans: Carl Sandburg, Jane Addams, Jens Jensen, Stephen Mather, Harriet Monroe, Donald Culross Peattie, Edwin Way Teale, Henry Cowles, Senator Paul Douglas, and thousands of lesser known patriots who valued something more than urban sprawl: a vision of a great city and a great dunescape both in community, each with their integrity. A good historian, Engel not only has thoroughly researched his facts, but he also weaves them together for a connected account. *Sacred Sands* is not only a chronicle of events, but finds a worthy plot in this chapter of American history. Reviewing the decades, Engel asks not so much What next? as So what? He detects what is going on in events taking place.

Engel's thesis is that the struggle to save the Dunes is an instance of American civil religion. In a metaphor borrowed from Mircea Eliade, used repeatedly throughout the book, the Dunes became a *sacred center*. Here is his argument:

For those in Chicago who sought a new revelation of the God of democracy in the opening years of the twentieth century, the decisive manifestation of the sacred could be no other than social democracy in the making. In the variegated, ever-changing panorama of the Dunes landscape, they found a place that peculiarly exemplified and enriched their vision of the community-forming Power at the heart of existence. Here, in a remnant of wilderness that felt remote, yet was close by, the ultimate truth of the evolutionary adventure of life seemed dramatically apparent. The end of human striving was to achieve a co-creative community in partnership with a co-creative world. In the

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twentieth century, the Dunes became a sacred center for adherents of the religion of democracy in the Midwest (p. 87).

All good symbols, especially those at sacred centers, have layers of meaning. I will isolate two at the Dunes, to register appreciation for the one and some puzzlement (but not without appreciation) for the other. The Dunes undoubtedly served to generate religious experiences in those who loved them. Even among those whose visits were more explicitly recreational, the religious dimension was often tacit. Engel has ample documentation of this power in the Dunes. Further, since I myself have experienced the capacity of pristine nature to provoke religious experience, I find this eminently plausible, especially since Chicagoans, immersed in the built environment, had otherwise so little opportunity to confront spontaneous nature. All the more then, that they should value contact in the Dunes with "some creative force beyond human ken" (p. 120).

This sacred center was a place of refuge from the artificiality and excesses of the city, a place to encounter the aboriginal "Power at the heart of existence" (p. 87, 109). "The primordial *act of creation* goes on continually in the Dunes" (p. 121). One wants winds, water, sand, sky, a living evolutionary ecosystem, not only for scientific study, not merely for recreation, but as a sacrament of God. One wants "a primeval wilderness" side by side with "seething civilization" (p. 237), and the more seething the civilization the more valuable the primeval wilderness. It provides religious experiences for which there are no substitutes in town, not even in the Chicago churches. So, at the time of the Dunes' greatest peril, Sandburg pleaded, "They constitute a signature of time and eternity: once lost the loss would be irrevocable" (p. 117).

When we turn to the Dunes as a symbol of civil religion, beyond their signature of time and eternity, Engel's claim is also to be commended, but somewhat amended. The fight to save the Dunes was a fight against rampant, triumphant industrialism, not against industry as such but against industrialization of the last acre, as if humans had no other modes of interest and encounter before the natural world than to eat it up in the name of economic growth. This was a citizens' against a consumers' vision of the world, a fight for public welfare against private interests, a fight for multidimensional persons rather than one-dimensional ones, for community within capitalism. In this sense, the struggle to establish the social good (including those values associated with wildness in the Dunes) was, in the words of Engel's subtitle, "the struggle for community in the Indiana Dunes." Though a wild ecosystem, the Dunes became also a cultural symbol. Saving them represented the civil will in conflict with the industrial will, and it is possible to interpret the Dunes as a cultural symbol of social democracy. Edwin Way Teale accurately observed, "The long fight to save wild beauty represents democracy at its best. It requires citizens to practice the hardest of virtues—self-restraint" (p. 213). Engel wants to establish "an ethic that links the imperative of social justice with the imperative of environmental preservation" (p. xviii). In this he is impressively successful.

But this second layer of meaning goes further. It is not merely in the *struggle to save the dunes* that social democracy is exemplified, but the *Dunes themselves* are taken to manifest a communal virtue—they reveal something to humans about community. There is some genuine connection between community found naturally in the Dunes and community forming socially in the American democracy. The Dunes are "a manifestation of the *community-forming* Power at

the heart of existence" (*italics added*) (p. 87) evidenced naturally in the wild, evidenced socially in the building of a democratic Chicago.

By the argument of Henry Cowles, who helped found the science of ecology with the study of plant succession in these Dunes, "The struggle for community in the world of plants was like the struggle for community in the world at large" (p. 149). By the account of A. F. Knotts, who "articulated the perception of the Dunes as the image and axis of the world," they were "the place where the sacred history of participatory democracy was symbolically represented in the landscape" (p. 109-10). The Dunites "conceived the meaning of democracy to be equal freedom in community, or the 'cooperative commonwealth,'" and this became their primary interpretive category for interpreting all phases of existence, from the natural landscape to Chicago society. "The authentic vision of community inherent within the democratic experience was larger than human community alone. They yoked the revolutionary ideals of freedom, equality, and fraternity to the ecological principles of unity and interdependence among all forms of being." A "prophetic" and "comprehensive vision of community . . . was associated with the Dunes landscape" (pp. xviii-xix).

Many of us know the social model as applied both to ecosystems and to society. I have used it myself, I hope with discretion and profit. Both the dunescape and America are communities, and there are relevant analogies between the two. In both ecosystem and society there is succession, struggle, pluralism, independence amidst interdependence, give and take, novelty, experiment, adventure. But is there equality? Is there freedom? Perhaps. Wild animals are free, uncaged. They do what they please, and there are no prohibitions of traditional class and status, nor privileges of wealth, although there are sometimes dominance hierarchies. But neither does anything grant nor respect another's right to be free or equal. Is there cooperation? Is there a commonwealth? The members of an ecosystem operate together willy-nilly, blindly; their functions and roles are interwoven. But they do not deliberately cooperate for the common good, as must the members of a human society.

There both is, and is not, a commonwealth. Jensen's council ring, where equals come together in dialogue (pp. 200-206) may be a fine symbol of human society, but it really has no analogue in the dunes ecosystem. The equal freedom in community, the "brotherhood of all living things" (p. 201), if such there is in the wild dunes, is not illuminating about what equal freedom in community in a metropolitan society should mean. It is as discontinuous as continuous with it. There are many limitations to the social model of a "cooperative commonwealth" alike in the dunes and in Chicago, and I wish that Engel and/or his Dunites had better recognized the limits of the symbolic connections.

Natural objects which become cultural symbols express the qualities they bear with mixed authenticity and analogy. Thus the eagle is a symbol of American strength and freedom, and there is some legitimate sense in which the eagle itself is strong and free. But the alligator is a symbol of Florida and the connection is hardly more than accidental. Are there qualities in the alligator that Floridians seek to emulate? Horsetooth Mountain provides the logo for Fort Collins, Colorado. It is a local preserve and park as a result of a citizens' fight against development there, but the city fathers do not expect to learn from the mountain, or from the ecosystem it supports, anything about the conduct of the city government.

Sometimes natural objects actually bear in their own objective way some form of the reality they come intersubjectively to symbolize for a culture; sometimes

they are simply assigned the value they embody. The Dunes are a complex and mixed case. There is perhaps something to be learned in the Dunes community struggle that is transferable to Chicago social affairs—concepts of interdependence, recycling, parts-in-wholes, homeostasis, reciprocity, adaptedness, pluralism, openness, experiment, succession, associational life, and the like. Engel wants to claim that ecological science, emerging in the Chicago area, helped influence the vision of the open, progressive, experimental democratic society; and, vice versa, the social vision fed into the science of ecology at Chicago, with its stress on succession, struggle, cooperation, pluralism, and so on. In this Engel has given us much to ponder.

Still, the disanalogies between ecological communities and sociological communities are as significant as the analogies. In the Dunes biological community there is no social policy, no government, no intentional cooperation or lack of it, no interpersonal relations, no moral capacity, and therefore no moral culpability, neither egoism nor altruism. There is neither justice nor injustice, no civil law, no evil grafted onto power, no one to have visions of what ought to be beyond what is. The forces that bind the Dunes organisms together are merely biological even when they are ecological; the forces that bind Chicagoans together are social in a much richer sense. Human community, with its vision of social democracy, is a marvelous emergent over anything known in plant or zoological communities.

Thus to say that Chicagoans looked to the Dunes for a manifestation of “the community-forming Power at the heart of existence” is true but only within limits. Let us grant that the Dunes did indeed become a sacred center for the civil religion of democracy. But the Dunes were assigned more value than they actually carried. In an ecosystem, there is simply not enough manifestation of the Divine community-forming power to guide a democracy. Though a symbol of civil religion, the Dunes are in fact an uncivil place. Such wildness is precisely part of their beauty, in contrast, not alliance, with the civility desired in Chicago.

Let us indeed appreciate ecosystems. Let us love water, sand, wind, and sky. These experiences give us a sense of proportion and place, of awe and grandeur, of time and eternity. But they are not sufficient to civilize us. Chicagoans needed more and genuine civilization, as much as encounter with primeval nature. Here the civilizing forces, opposed (in part, not in whole) to the industrial forces, found their focus in the struggle to save the Dunes, more than in the Dunes themselves. At the same time, the Dunes did provide a place for Chicagoans, incited to religious experiences there, to become something more noble than merely economic human beings. Engel knows these things, but one could wish that the analysis had faced this issue more directly.

Nevertheless, *Sacred Sands* is eloquent and powerful, a story of Chicagoans past and their landscape, but with present moral message and vision for Americans in their landscapes everywhere.

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