

THOREAU'S RELIGION

Thoreau's Religion presents a ground-breaking interpretation of Henry David Thoreau's most famous book, *Walden*. Rather than treating Walden Woods as a lonely wilderness, Balthrop-Lewis demonstrates that Thoreau's ascetic life was a form of religious practice dedicated to cultivating a just, multispecies community. The book makes an important contribution to scholarship in religious studies, political theory, English, environmental studies, and critical theory by offering the first sustained reading of Thoreau's religiously motivated politics. In Balthrop-Lewis's vision, practices of renunciation like Thoreau's can contribute to the reformation of social and political life.

In this, the book transforms Thoreau's image, making him a vital source for a world beset by inequality and climate change. Balthrop-Lewis argues for an environmental politics in which ecological flourishing is impossible without economic and social justice.

ALDA BALTHROP-LEWIS is a Research Fellow in the Institute for Religion and Critical Inquiry at Australian Catholic University. She holds a PhD in Religion from Princeton University and has taught Religious Studies at Brown University. Her research, which focuses on religious ethics and the circulation of ideas among theological, artistic, and popular idioms, has appeared in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* and the *Journal of Religious Ethics*.

“Here at last is a thoughtful and deeply informed reflection on Thoreau as a religious writer, a contemplative who went to Walden Pond to reorient his deepest values against a world gone mad with casual cruelty. As Balthrop-Lewis shows, Thoreau lived his ethical transformation not alone for himself but, as a writer, in partnership with us, toward a renewal of religious thought and action. She gives us *Walden* as scripture, a call to live a higher life by locating and reconnecting with all on whom we depend — human and nonhuman alike — so we might renounce the lures of domination and awaken the world to both environmental and political justice. *This* is the Thoreau we need now.”

— *Laura Dassow Walls, William P. and Hazel B. White Professor of English, University of Notre Dame, and author of Henry David Thoreau: A Life (2017)*

“This book by Balthrop-Lewis is more than just a brilliantly conceived, wonderfully written, and thoroughly convincing reinterpretation of Thoreau. Much more broadly, in its implications for theology, politics, and environmental ethics, the book counters artificial separations between spiritual practice and efforts at political reform, between religiously inspired appreciation for the natural world and the struggle for justice. In every respect, it represents a groundbreaking achievement.”

— *Kathryn Tanner, Marquand Professor of Systematic Theology, Yale Divinity School*

“This book is undoubtedly the best treatment of Thoreau in this generation. Alda Balthrop-Lewis is herself a profound philosopher-poet who captures the subtle and sublime genius of the great philosopher-poet Thoreau like no other. And in these bleak times of ecological catastrophe, we need them both!”

— *Cornel West, Professor of the Practice of Public Philosophy, Harvard University*

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Thoreau's Religion
Walden Woods, Social Justice, and
the Politics of Asceticism

Alda Balthrop-Lewis



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To Anat Benzvi

*a writing partner
who provides wisdom and whimsy
in all the right measures*

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The reason why an ingenious soul shuns society, is to the end of finding society. It repudiates the false, out of love for the true.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Literary Ethics"

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Preface

I care about people and their flourishing. I care about the places we live and the other things that live in those places, and about the relationship between us and the places we live. I care about growing things and making things. I care about walking, and trees. I want to follow Jesus and I think that the gospel teaches a preferential option for the poor, which just means that the poor have a special relationship to God, and that all people, but especially those with privileges, should prioritize the wellbeing of the poor. I care about communities, and about building communities in which people are supported, loved, and provided the freedom to live as they like. I care about building a future for humans in which our greatest goods are valued: our love for one another, our capacity for learning, our differences from one another.

And I also care about books. One of the books that I love is Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*.

I like it because it is funny, and beautiful, and weird. It is hard. I like it because it is about people and the places they live and the relationships they have to other people. I like that it doesn't hide how cranky it is. I like that it shows me something about how much is possible outside of what I expect. I like that it doesn't seem to hide its weird messy bits, its contradictions and vices.

One of the places in the world that I love most of all is a region on the Gulf of Mexico, on the Panhandle of Florida, where I grew up, where my mother now lives and where my father farmed clams. It is an extraordinary place, one of the

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biodiversity hotspots of North America, full of forests, rivers, marshes, and estuaries that host teeming ecosystems. It attracts people who care about and enjoy such things, and it is beautiful.

This place I love also has a fascinating, mostly forgotten, important history. Because of its geographical position, the British built a fort on the Apalachicola River in the last year of the war of 1812, in what was then Spanish Florida. They made alliances there with Indigenous people who lived in the region or had fled there from Alabama – especially Red Stick Creek and Seminole. They also collaborated with free Black people including some free citizens of Spanish Florida (where there was not slavery) and some formerly enslaved people who had fled to Spanish Florida from enslavement in the United States.¹ The British distributed arms and ammunitions

¹ As this manuscript is being copyedited, there is an important, ongoing debate about race and typography. The question is about whether to capitalize the words “black” and “white” when they are used to refer to a person’s race or ethnicity. Until recently, many style guides have suggested they should be downcased. However, in 2020 several major style guides changed their practice in response to the Movement for Black Lives. Some people still argue that neither should be capitalized, because to do so would be to naturalize race, when racialization is a historical process that has often been used as a tool of domination. Others argue that Black (with a capital letter) as a racial and ethnic adjective is the appropriate way to describe Black Americans who identify as such, and whose longer ethnic histories were violently obscured by enslavement. Among those who capitalize Black, some think that “white” as a racial description should stay downcased, because it is not claimed as an ethnic identity in the same way except by white supremacists. Others argue that both Black and White should be capitalized, since Black is claimed as an identity by Black people, but is not a natural fact and was always in historical relationship to White identity. According to this view, capitalizing White shows up whiteness as a socially constructed racial identity, when it often otherwise remains normalized and invisible, conferring undue advantages on White people.

I want my typographical choices to show that I consider racialization a historical process that has been used as both a tool of domination and of resistance, that this historical process has real effects in social life and politics, and that I respect the self-identifications of Black people and admire their contributions to American life. With respect for many who disagree on this question and without a standardized consensus, I have chosen to capitalize “Black” and leave “white” downcased when

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among their allies in the region, and when they withdrew in 1815, after learning of the end of the War of 1812, they left the fort under the control of their Indigenous and Black allies. Most of the Indigenous people returned to the places that they had lived before, but the Black British allies remained at the fort, cleared land along the river for farming, and established a growing community in freedom.² A Creek observer named William McGirt wrote, in the summer of 1815: “They Keep Sentry & the Negroes are Saucy & insolent, and say they are all Free.”³ I find these “saucy,” “insolent” people deeply admirable. They enacted their own freedom.

This community of free Black people was only about 60 miles down the river from Georgia, where 105,218 people were reported enslaved by 1810.⁴ The place was called “Negro Fort” in the press, and it was seen by some US citizens

used as racial descriptions. My sense is that the process of white people meaningfully reckoning with the history of whiteness remains nascent, and capitalizing the word in advance of white people learning our racial history is unlikely to be an effective means of carrying out that reckoning. One useful source with respect to the history of whiteness is Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York, NY: Norton, 2010).

² The first book-length work on this community is Nathaniel Millett, *The Maroons of Prospect Bluff and Their Quest for Freedom in the Atlantic World* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2013). “The process of comparing Prospect Bluff with other maroon settlements provides a rare glimpse into how a community of successful North American slave rebels might choose to live, when entirely on their own terms. The comparative method demonstrates how full and remarkable a version of freedom had been achieved at Prospect Bluff” (Millett, *The Maroons of Prospect Bluff*, 98). See also, Matthew J. Clavin, *Aiming for Pensacola: Fugitive Slaves on the Atlantic and Southern Frontiers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 39–61. “It was the largest maroon colony of fugitive slaves in the history of the territory that would become the United States” (Clavin, *Aiming for Pensacola*, 40).

³ Quoted in Clavin, *Aiming for Pensacola*, 52.

⁴ The figure comes from census data reported in John Cummings, “Negro Population in the United States 1790–1915” (US Census Bureau, 1918), 57, www.census.gov/library/publications/1918/dec/negro-population-1790-1915.html (accessed August 20, 2020).

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and politicians as a threat to the United States. Southern enslavers complained that the community served as a beacon for people escaping enslavement. Clavin writes that “according to one U.S. Army lieutenant, ‘their numbers were increasing daily.’”⁵ So one year after the British withdrawal, in July of 1816 when the inhabitations and gardens of the settlement stretched for 50 miles along the river, the US military surrounded the fort both on land and on the river and demanded the surrender of the 300–400 free people who were sheltered inside. The occupants refused to surrender, raised the English Jack, and defended the fort for days. Eventually, a shot from US gunboats on the river hit the gunpowder magazine and caused a massive explosion. That explosion killed many of the people inside the fort. The site of the fort and that deadly explosion is now located within what is seen as pristine national forest, the historic markers (which use the current name “Fort Gadsden”) are rarely visited, and the story of the free Black people who grew gardens and fought to maintain their home is largely forgotten by the tourists who come to paddle the river. Kayaking is big.

At the beginning of my academic career, I thought my research would treat that place, whose ecology and history I loved. I planned an ethnographic project about the way people think about environmental ethics on a local level there. I went to work learning about ethnographic methods, and I spent time in Apalachicola doing fieldwork: attending local government meetings, learning about environmental activism, going out on the water with fishermen, and getting to know scientists who study the bay on which the town is located. That topic seemed to me rich and deep and ethically complicated. It also seemed that to do it well I would need to work on it for a long time. It occurred to me that a first book should be a project you can finish, not one that you can imagine working on for the rest of your life.

⁵ Clavin, 52.

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So I switched courses, and decided to write first about a book, *Walden*, and about a dead white man rather than a living, struggling community. Because I think Thoreau is endlessly compelling, this didn't feel like a loss, exactly, more like something I needed to do first. Needed to do now. A way of getting to know myself, and practice for everything else. But there have been days when it was hard to see how the work I was doing on these nineteenth-century Yankee texts was related to the place I started out caring about.

Then, one day, deep in the middle of this project, something amazing happened. It doesn't happen often, at least not to me, but I guess every now and then when we're lucky the fates can send us a sign that we're in the place we're supposed to be, doing what we're supposed to be doing. That day I was reading in Thoreau's *Journal* from the summer of 1845, the summer he went to live at Walden. And it was as if the parts of my life that sometimes seemed remote from one another were coming together in a way I could not yet explain. Just beginning to settle in to his life at the Pond, Thoreau wrote,

And earlier today came 5 Lestrighones – Railroad men who take care of the road, some of them at least. They still represent the bodies of men – transmitting arms and legs – and bowels downward from those remote days to more remote. They have some got a rude wisdom withal – thanks to their dear experience. And one with them a handsome younger man – a sailor Greek like man – says “Sir I like your notions – I think I shall live so my self Only I should like a wilder country – where there is more game. I have been among the Indians near Apallachecola I have lived with them, I like your kind of life – Good-day I wish you success and happiness.”⁶

⁶ Henry David Thoreau, *Journal*, Volume 2: 1842–1848, ed. Robert Sattelmeyer (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 160–61.

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Thoreau recorded his encounter with the railroad men at work in Walden Woods in his usual, playful way, likening them to ancient Greek “Lestrigones” who had appeared in Homer’s *Odyssey*, and praising the wisdom they had gained by experience. Then he quoted one of them, one who seems to have been a kindred spirit: “Sir I like your notions.” It is fun to imagine what Thoreau said his notions were to elicit this response. Did he say, “I have come to the woods to live deliberately”? Did he say, “I want to see how little I can live on”? Did he say, “I love the wild, and I want to live among it”? But then, and this was what took me aback, the railroad man had been to Apalachicola! He had lived with the “Indians” there, in a “wilder country.” He thought it would be an even better place to live than Walden Woods, and he told Thoreau so. I grew up with legends of old Indian tracks through the woods, grew up looking for arrowheads on the beach, grew up trekking out to see middens made of the shells of oysters and clams, just some of the “game” the Indigenous people lived on, evidence of the societies who loved the place before we settlers came. And here, in Thoreau’s *Journal*, was a railroad man who had lived with them.

Because of Apalachicola’s role as a port, it is not so surprising that railroad men in Concord would have been there. But to find that Thoreau wrote about the fact that they had, startled me. I jumped up, shouting. It gave me comfort, somehow, in the middle of a project I sometimes struggled to believe in, to find the Panhandle I loved in its earlier, wilder shape on those pages.

I think it made me feel that somehow, in some way I do not yet know, my life does hang together in all its half-formed pieces. The work I do is sometimes so interdisciplinary I have the feeling it will all fall apart, that the center cannot hold. This is a temptation. When I have it, I remember that Annie Dillard wrote:

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You take it on faith that the multiform and variously lighted latitudes and longitudes were part of one world, that you didn't drop chopped from house to house, coast to coast, life to life, but in some once comprehensible way moved there, a city block at a time, a highway mile at a time, a degree of latitude and longitude at a time ...⁷

When I am sitting elsewhere, writing, in Chicago or New Jersey or, now, in Australia, on Wurundjeri Country, and I remember how far from home, from the “wilder country” that I love, I am, I try to remember Dillard's faith. You take it on faith, she says, that the parts belong – somehow – together, in one world. And at the same time, I think, you have to remember that no matter how many parts there seem to be, there is only one you holding them together. You have to know who that is to tell us the story of your moving elsewhere “a city block at a time, a highway mile at a time, a degree of latitude and longitude at a time.”

I want to write toward a wide, beautiful, complicated, suffering world. This work deals with issues related to race, religion, class, and environment. Writing about these things, I have discovered some complicated linguistic issues about how I identify myself with respect to that world, those races, religions, classes, places, beauty, and suffering. When I describe white people, or Black people, or poor people, or rich people, or Indigenous people, or people who live in places that suffer, or the pious ones, do I say “they”? “We”? I am only me. Thoreau wrote at the beginning of *Walden*, “I, on my own side, require of every writer, first or last, a simple and sincere account of his own life” (I, 2).⁸ I try to remember that

⁷ Annie Dillard, *An American Childhood* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 249.

⁸ I give references to Thoreau's *Walden*, “Civil Disobedience,” and “Slavery in Massachusetts” in the tradition of Stanley Cavell: “To make my references to *Walden* independent of any particular edition, I shall give citations by chapter and paragraph, roman numerals for the former, arabic for the latter. References to ‘Civil Disobedience’ are also according to paragraph, preceded by ‘CD.’” Stanley

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my own life shapes what I see to a large extent, especially when I write about people who are different from me, whose experience I only know distantly. I know I must often get it wrong. Myles Horton – educator for the US civil rights movement – wrote, about “Knowing Yourself,”

You have to be careful not to think that you’re somebody else. I’ve had to avoid thinking that I’m Nicaraguan or, when I was in India, Indian. I have a tendency to want to identify with people. I have to say to myself, “Look, Horton, get as close to people as you can, have as much interest as you can, but don’t get things mixed up. You’re white, and black people can’t say they are color-blind. Whites and white-controlled institutions always remind them that they’re black, so you’ve got to recognize color.” That doesn’t mean that you feel superior, it’s just that you’ve got to realize that you can never fully walk in other people’s shoes. You can only be a summer soldier, and when the excitement is over, you can go back home. That doesn’t mean that you don’t have solidarity with black people and aren’t accepted; it just means that you have a different role to play.⁹

I’m a woman who grew up with all kinds of privileges, and whose early privileges have only accumulated since. Some of those privileges I am so grateful for; others have made me a smaller, more anxious, less feeling and caring person. In this work I aim to write about the issues I have come to care about, but being careful not to think that I’m somebody else. In this spirit, I identify myself as white in the text that follows, not to feel superior or inferior, but in an effort – an effort still incomplete, I think – to be clear with you and with myself about who I am and the role I mean to play.

Cavell, *The Senses of Walden* (New York: Viking Press, 1972), 4. All references to Thoreau’s other writings in this work are given in footnotes to particular editions. In addition, I have retained original punctuation for all Thoreau quotations.

⁹ Myles Horton, *The Long Haul: An Autobiography* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997), 195.

Acknowledgments

This book began at Princeton University, where I was ably supported by a community of faculty, staff, and students whose joy in scholarship, commitment to transformative pedagogy, and natural collegiality inspired my own optimistic sense of what academic life might be. It was sustained through a visiting appointment at Brown University, where my students' grave suspicion of Thoreau's place in the history of settler colonialism deepened my appreciation for the difficulty of the task I had set myself: to help Thoreau speak to the present. I fear I have not met their challenge, but I trust they will carry the torch themselves. Since then, the book has been given the space, time, and resources it required by the Institute for Religion and Critical Inquiry at Australian Catholic University in Melbourne, Australia.

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Portions of the book have appeared elsewhere in print and I thank the publishers for permission to use the material, which has been significantly rearranged.

- “Thoreau’s Woodchopper, Wordsworth’s Leech-Gatherer, and the Representation of ‘Humble and Rustic Life.’” In *Theology and Ecology across the Disciplines: On Care for Our Common Home*, edited by Celia Deane-Drummond and Rebecca Artinian-Kaiser. London: Bloomsbury, 2018.
- “Exemplarist Environmental Ethics: Thoreau’s Political Asceticism against Solution Thinking.” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 47, 3 (September 2019): 525–50.
- “Active and Contemplative Lives in a Changing Climate: The Emersonian Roots of Thoreau’s Political Asceticism.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 87, 2 (May 30, 2019): 311–32.

Many readers have responded to previous versions of this book. Jeffrey Stout read the first draft with tremendous care and helped me imagine it could become something good to read. Mark Cladis, Keri Day, Molly Farneth, Eric Gregory, Martin Kavka, Susannah Ticciati, Cornel West, and the anonymous readers from Cambridge University Press all provided generous written comments. Other readers have included Leora Batnitzky, Anat Benzvi, Shira Billet, Wallace Best, Liane Carlson, Rachel Davies, Jessica Delgado, Emily Dumler-Winckler, Lexi Eikelbloom, Rick Elgendy, Eddie Glaude, Jonathan Gold, Clifton Granby, Joshua Nunziato, Seth Perry, Al Raboteau, Susan Stewart, Sarah Stewart-Kroeker, Judith

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I was formed as a writer and a thinker before this project ever began by the wise teaching of Elizabeth Bernhardt, Adriane Colburn, Renee Courey, Kris Culp, Arnold Eisen, Linda Eyster, Franklin Gamwell, Van Harvey, Kevin Hector, Cynthia Lindner, Barbara Pitkin, Eric Slauter, Brent Sockness, and Lee Yearley. I am grateful for the lessons they taught me.

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Though I admire people who stay put, as Thoreau did, and I often wish I could do it myself, I belong to a generation and a class whose life consists mostly of coming and going. I have been coming and going from some amazing communities over

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the last many years: in Tallahassee and Franklin County, Florida; in Boston; in London; in California; in Italy and environs; in St. Paul, Minnesota; in Chicago; in New Jersey and New York; in Austin, Texas; and in Melbourne, Australia. In those places – and in airports, train stations, and bus depots on the way – I have often received the kindness of strangers, who listened to me talk about this work with interest, and encouraged me by suggesting they might want to read it themselves. To those communities and to those strangers I just want to say: thank you. Many of the virtues of this work were born in my relationships to you.

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Anat Benzvi became my writing partner before I realized it, helped me (every week, sometimes more) through the whole of this project, and continues to remind me that whatever it takes to keep writing is what you have to do. “If in order to write you need ... a certain light yellow paper, a certain special pen, a dim light shining from the left, it is useless to tell yourself that just any pen will do, that any paper and any light will suffice.”¹ I have dedicated the book to her because it probably would not exist without her, and in any case it would have been a lot less fun.

¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 10.

Acknowledgments

I completed this work halfway around the world from where it began. From the window where I wrote the bulk of it, in Melbourne, Australia, I could see the weather and the children come and go. My thanks to David Newheiser for taking me there. We have cared together (through much contestation!) about many of the ideas presented here, and his presence in my life has shaped every page.