Sola natura

Richard Higgins offers a remarkably full account of Henry David Thoreau’s ever-evolving faith.

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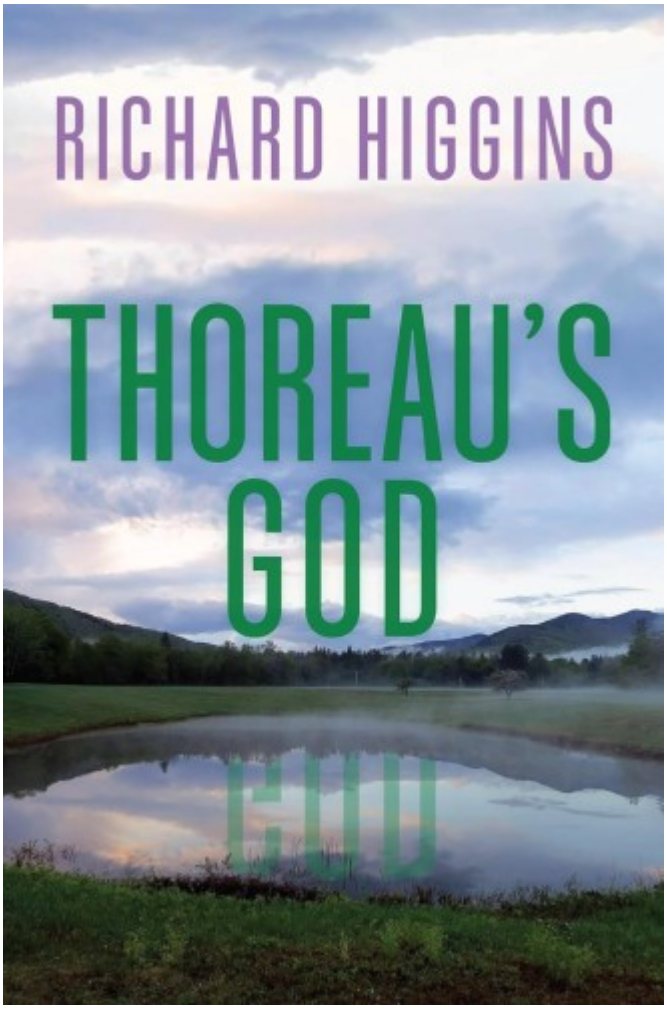
In Review



Thoreau’s God

By Richard Higgins
University of Chicago Press

Several scholars have recently published examinations of Henry David Thoreau's spirituality and life philosophy, offering musings about what the iconic sage at Walden Pond really thought about God and religion. (Was he a pantheist or a transcendentalist or a Buddhist or a theosophist? Did he simply replace religion with nature?) No one captures the breadth and evolution of Thoreau's religious understanding as well as Richard Higgins.

Thoreau's God is impressive in scope. Through extensive research and review of Thoreau's voluminous writing, Higgins chronicles the lifelong evolution of his belief, from his early disparaging of Christianity and the church to his "eclectic, experiential, noninstitutional spirituality" which is so popular today.

Thoreau lived before it was a cliché to say "the ordinary is sacred." He understood deeply that the word *ordinary* has religious resonances (e.g., ordo, ordination). Increasingly, he found his religion in the woods themselves, in the wild, divine patterns and relationships among flora and fauna. According to Higgins, these ideas were sparked early on by Thoreau's reading of Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Nature* while a student at Harvard. This manifesto of transcendentalism enthralled the young Thoreau "with its call to know the divine through direct experience and by its view of nature as an organic language of spirit." Emerson's suggestion that we can come to know God "without mediator or veil" would become, for Thoreau, a lifelong endeavor.

Emerson's *Nature* may offer the clearest window into Thoreau's early religious beliefs, revealing how he first came to understand the Concord woods as both scripture and temple. "The happiest man," Emerson writes, "is he who learns from nature the lesson of worship." Thoreau sought no human structure or contrivance or community to worship what he called God. Rather, he found God in the most ordinary aspects of life. He described his daily bath in Walden Pond as a "religious exercise." Reading and walking were his central spiritual practices.

Thoreau evolved toward this understanding and its practice over time. He wrote his first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849), during his two-year stay at Walden Pond. This book, a rumination on the early death of his brother John, is known for its fierce critique of the church. Higgins explores this attack on clergy

and institutional religion early on, using it as a jumping-off point for his analysis.

While Thoreau's critique of the church in this text gave him "a pitchfork and horns in the popular imagination," writes Higgins, that image misinterprets the author's intentions. "Thoreau's animus against the church in *A Week* was not entirely religious. He distrusted institutions of all kinds—schools, government, and philanthropic societies as well as religious bodies." The church, Thoreau believed, had "sold its soul to power, prestige and property." He was appalled at what he perceived as the moral cowardice of ministers, exemplified by their half-hearted support of the abolitionist movement. Higgins sums up: "Religion without the moral law was no religion at all for Thoreau."

Thoreau imagined the social gospel a decade or two before it coalesced into a movement. He repeatedly called out the church for its hypocrisy. Higgins cites a journal entry of November 16, 1858, in which Thoreau writes: "The church! It is eminently the timid institution, and the heads and pillars of it are . . . the greatest cowards in the community."

Aside from its moral failings, Thoreau simply never saw the institution of the church as necessary for (or even relevant to) religious experience. Following Emerson, he believed that there was no need for the church or a pastor to mediate between him and God. Unlike his Puritan predecessors, who believed they would know God *sola scriptura* (by scripture alone), Higgins notes, Thoreau believed that he would come to know God *sola natura*.

This belief is evident in his renowned 1862 essay "Walking," published in *The Atlantic*, in which he explores the spiritual component of this ritual. Thoreau walked for three or four hours every afternoon for much of his life, and his daily walks were a central part of his spiritual practice. The term he uses in the essay to describe this practice, however, is not *walk* but *saunter*. Thoreau begins the essay with two etymologies of that word. The first is from *à la Sainte Terre* ("to the Holy Land"), which suggests pilgrims on their way to a holy place, as in *The Canterbury Tales* or the hajj to Mecca. His second etymology is from *sans terre* ("without land"). Thoreau takes "without land" to mean without a home, claiming that the saunterer in his homelessness is at home anywhere and present everywhere. The idea that evolves, which has its roots in *Walden* (1854), is that the holy land sought by the walker is not a faraway place—or even a place at all—but a way of seeing and loving the world, of being at home wherever you are. A kind of sacred belonging.

This understanding aligns with Higgins's final analysis of Thoreau's spiritual life. "Going out into nature and studying its cycles and processes," he writes, "became a way of going to the divinity within." The heart of Thoreau's religion, Higgins continues, is "his desire to commune with sacred mystery." Thoreau's religion, then, is a creative journey of exploration—a lifelong saunter. But it is also, as Higgins reveals, a journey of love. The concept of love is often lost in Thoreau scholarship.

"The strains of a more heroic faith vibrate through the weekdays and the fields more than through the sabbath and the church," Thoreau wrote in a letter to a friend. "To shut the ears to the immediate voice of God, and prefer to know him by report will be the only sin. . . . Our religion is where our love is." This final phrase—"our religion is where our love is"—leads Higgins to the end of his analysis and his closing insight: "Our religion is here, in this glorious world, in one sense, and in another sense it is not here, but in 'a place beyond all place,' one that we can know only by an inner groping in the dark. I think Thoreau is saying that our love is what unites these outer and inner realms."

Thoreau died of tuberculosis in 1862, at age 44. Many friends visited him at his home in Concord during the final weeks of his life, and some of his last recorded thoughts reflect his ever-evolving faith. When Parker Pillsbury commented that Thoreau was "near the brink of a dark river" and wondered "how the opposite shore may appear," Thoreau responded, "One world at a time." When his aunt Louisa asked him if he had made his peace with God, Thoreau said, "I did not know we had ever quarreled." Two of Thoreau's final six words were *moose* and *Indian*. The others? "Now comes good sailing."