

Jerry Earl Johnston: The valley of 'natural and revealed religion' in Hawaii's Valley of the Temples

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OAHU, Hawaii — Most of us know people who say they never attend a traditional church, that their church is in nature.

And most of us also know places where such people don't have to choose.

The little box church above Monument Valley, in Utah's San Juan County, for example, weds nature's bounty to the Bible.

There's also a Presbyterian chapel like that, overlooking the ocean in San Clemente, California.

And the same can be said for the shrines that fill the Valley of Temples on the windward side of Oahu, Hawaii.



A replica of the Byodo-In Buddhist temple near Kyoto Japan. The Japanese Temple is nearly a thousand years old.

Low below in the valley sit the shrines and cemeteries for Christian, Buddhist and Shinto pilgrims.

High above stand the great, green pinnacles of the Ko'olan Mountains, peaks that form natural temples themselves. The scene presents a bracing sight that can be found in the movie "Jurassic Park" and the television series "Lost."

In the Valley of Temples nature's glory links with the glory of God.



It's the old song, "The Church in the Wildwood."

Brigadier Gen. Joshua Chamberlain, of Civil War fame, was said to be a university professor "of natural and revealed religion."

The Valley of Temples would be his classroom.

Last week, my brother, my son and I discovered the place. At least we discovered it for us.

We found dozens of Asian tourists already there, paying respects at the replica of Japan's Byodo-In temple. The Japanese temple is almost a thousand years old and stands just outside Kyoto.

In Hawaii, temple visitors can sound a gong, gaze at an enormous Amida Buddha (the name means "limitless life" and "limitless light") and they can pause beside a stream where black swans curl and hundreds of koi scramble for food the visitors fling their way.

"Tranquility," my brother said as we left.



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Ian Johnston

The Amida Buddha in the Valley of Temples Byodo-In shrine.

Back up over the hill is the alabaster Christian chapel standing guard over thousands of graves from many of walks of faith. Along the pathway a woman sits reverently beneath a canopy, taking reservations for future “residents.”

There’s a Catholic garden with the Stations of the Cross and a Japanese garden filled with Hakas, plots big enough to hold 30 family members. Between the various gardens spread open fields where energetic kids are always tracking a mongoose or two.

The three of us spent a good chunk of the afternoon there last week.



We left feeling that craggy peaks do blend well with church pews and Buddhists look an awful lot like Christians.

There was a wholeness to it all, a unity that included the three of us.

In Hawaii, a state famous for seamless forms of music and dance, the seamless feel of the Valley of Temples is a natural.

As we walked to the car, I thought of the quote I marked with a star in a book back home in Utah that's from Ralph Waldo Emerson:

“The aspect of nature is devout. Like the figure of Jesus, she stands with bended head and hands folded upon the breast. The happiest man is he who learns from nature the lesson of worship.”