Muir, John (1838-1914)

Generations of nature lovers in America and the world have been thrilled and inspired by John Muir's accounts of his youthful experiences in the mountains of California – swaying atop a storm-blown spruce tree, communing with a favorite plant in the spray of a waterfall, or gazing upon the glories of his beloved Yosemite Valley. Over the same period, Muir's political career has served as a model of ethical and political commitment to an entire tradition of environmental activists. Both sides of Muir's life and work – the experiential and the activist – are expressions of a fundamentally religious orientation toward the natural world. Although the exact character of this religiousness has proven difficult for later interpreters to formulate in conceptual terms, the figure of Muir himself continues to serve as an icon of nature religion – a window through which individuals and communities can see their own relationships with nature in a deeper and more profound light.

John Muir was born on April 21, 1838, in Dunbar, Scotland, the first son of a middle-class family that would eventually include seven siblings. While Muir's mother Ann nurtured him with the delights of backyard flowers, his father Daniel (a lifelong Protestant seeker) expressed his version of Christian love by using scriptural injunction backed by physical punishment to keep the sometimes-headstrong boy from sin. Thus, contrasting currents of maternal affirmation and paternal restriction combined with the child's own capacities for sensual and imaginative contact with nature to infuse Muir's escapes to the surrounding Scottish coastline, moors, and hills with a profound and complex religious sensibility.
In 1849, when he was 11, Muir's family emigrated to America. On the Wisconsin frontier, Muir experienced the beauty and glory – as well as the hardship and danger – of wild nature with a greater intensity than ever before. In the human realm, he learned to balance his father's increasing harshness with an increased reliance upon his siblings, on the evangelical figure of Jesus as comforter and companion, and on his own sense of personal achievement in his work as farmhand, mechanic, and inventor. Finally leaving home in 1860, at age 22, Muir encountered yet other strands of nineteenth-century American Protestantism, including elements of a more liberal openness to modern scientific and evolutionary thought. Entering the University of Wisconsin at Madison in 1861, Muir was introduced by professors such as Ezra Carr to the latest research and theory in disciplines such as geology and chemistry, while Carr's wife Jeanne stood at the center of a social circle stitched together by the bonds of Christian love – love which was expressed and embodied in the intimacies of everyday domestic life as well as in a shared passion for amateur botany.

By late 1867, when Muir (inspired by explorers such as Alexander von Humboldt) left on a long botanical journey through the American South, he had moved decisively away from conservative Protestantism's devaluation of nature: "The world, we are told, was made especially for man – a presumption not supported by all the facts.... Why should man value himself as more than a small part of the one great unit of creation? And what creature of all that the Lord has taken the pains to make is not essential to the completeness of that unit – the cosmos?" After falling ill with some unknown fever in Florida, Muir continued his journey not to the Amazon but to California, where work as a sheepherder allowed him ample time to observe the works of
God both on the plains and in the mountains. Shaped by increasingly intimate letters to and from Jeanne Carr, Muir's religious experience of a welcoming nature became ever more sensual and energetic, even erotic, especially after he entered the Yosemite Valley in 1869: "Last Sabbath I was baptized in the irised foam of the Vernal & in the divine snow of the Nevada [falls], and you were there also & stood in real presence by the sheet of joyous rapids beneath the bridge." His earlier intellectual revaluation of the relationship between humanity and nature broke through to a more bodily, experiential level: "I'm in the woods woods woods, and they are in me-ee-ee!" Moreover, this communion with nature was an opening into communion with the divine: "I will fuse in spirit skies. I will touch naked God."

Perhaps understandably, Muir could not sustain in his everyday life the level of naturalistic ecstasy expressed in his letters and journals; as early as 1873 he had moved from Yosemite down to the San Francisco Bay area, where he would live for most of the rest of his life and from which he would take increasingly long botanical and scientific travels throughout California, the West, and Alaska, and eventually the world. Casting about for a career, he wrote influential geological articles on the glacial origins of Yosemite Valley, travel articles for local newspapers, and scientific studies of California trees though the 1870s; in 1879 he married Louie Strentzel, with whom he had two daughters (Helen and Wanda) and settled in Martinez, California, where Muir would farm for much of the 1880s. By the end of the decade, financially successful but tired of farming, Muir resumed his literary career with travel writing on the West and Alaska. A pair of articles in *Century Magazine* in 1890 and 1891 represented his first foray into political waters, in support of federal control of Yosemite Valley; his success in
influencing public opinion led to national prominence as a conservationist, through his work as cofounder and president of the Sierra Club, his numerous books and articles popularizing wilderness recreation and protection, and his friendships with important leaders such as Teddy Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot. However, despite numerous successes in protecting wild nature through the system of national parks and forests and other efforts during the Progressive era, defeats such as the damming of the Hetch Hetchy Valley for a reservoir in 1913 helped lend an apocalyptic and tragic element to an otherwise confident American conservation movement. Muir died in 1914.

Although undeniably grounded in the Christian Bible and in specifically Protestant theology and piety, Muir's nature religion has been interpreted by later scholars in the light of a wide array of ideas and images: Transcendentalism, mysticism, Taoism, Buddhism, pantheism, and others. However one describes it, at the heart of Muir's religiousness is (1) the importance of direct experience of nature and of the divine — experience that in all cases combines bodily, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual elements. Such experience reveals (2) the ecological interconnections between all beings, as captured in one of his most famous aphorisms: "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe." Out of this direct experience of interconnection comes (3) an attitude of reverence toward the world — reverence expressed through the pursuit of scientific knowledge as well as by a joyous humility before the mysterious and the unknown. Such reverence leads Muir to value nature at least as much as human beings, resulting in (4) a biocentric worldview; however, it is important to notice that Muir's biocentrism contains an unexpected hierarchy, as he clearly places wild nature on a higher moral plane than human-shaped nature (with
important practical ramifications such as the near-exclusion of agricultural and urban issues from his conception of conservation). Finally, Muir reformulates the prophetic spirit of the Old Testament and the moralism of the New into a call and demand for political and personal action on behalf of threatened nature, expressed most fully not in ethical theory but in his own public career as conservationist and activist.

Indeed, it has been through his actions as much as his words, his public figure and legend as much as his own writings, that Muir's legacy has brought these elements of direct experience, ecological interconnection, reverence, biocentrism, and activism to an ever-widening audience of environmentalists, nature-lovers, scholars, scientists, and politicians. Moreover, although the extent of change in his religious views over his lifetime has sometimes been overdrawn, his general trajectory from conservative to more liberal (or even radical) views has constituted an archetypal pattern through which many individuals have discerned or been inspired in their own religious development. Patron saint of environmentalism and intellectual forerunner of the philosophy of deep ecology, Muir has been influential beyond these specialized movements in making a religiously-grounded appreciation of and concern for wild nature a part of modern society and culture in general, in America and throughout the globe.

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Further Reading


