

THE NATURE OF JOHN MUIR'S RELIGION



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I. INTRODUCTION

"I think I might preach nature like an apostle, but if I should enter an ordinary ecclesiastical pulpit, I fear I should be found preaching much that was unsanctified and unorthodox."¹

John Muir was still in the first year of his Sierra sojourn when he wrote these words to his younger brother Daniel in Wisconsin. Ever since their self-imposed joint exile in Canada during the Civil War, Dan had been John's closest kin and confidant. He could tell his brother what he was never able to admit to his father: that leaving home nine years earlier had been not just a physical separation but a spiritual journey of no return. Nearly a decade of independent soul-searching had carried him far beyond the rigorous Calvinism of the Scottish Kirk.

But just how far had he traveled, and how much farther would he go? Muir's family and friends began to ask these questions 120 years ago, and today the answers still seem elusive. Did he replace Christianity with a new faith, or did he superimpose new ideas on a Judaeo-Christian foundation? Do the religious values and symbols that are diffused throughout his writings represent an entirely new belief system, a combination of eastern and western metaphysics, or an older ideology redefined in light of his wilderness experience? Was he attracted by the mystic strains of Zen Buddhism or the pantheism of the Hindus? Was he essentially Christian, as William Badè, his first biographer, claimed; or was he non-Christian or "pagan," as Stephen Fox has recently asserted? If his belief systems were basically Christian, does he follow the mainstream or a divergent branch?

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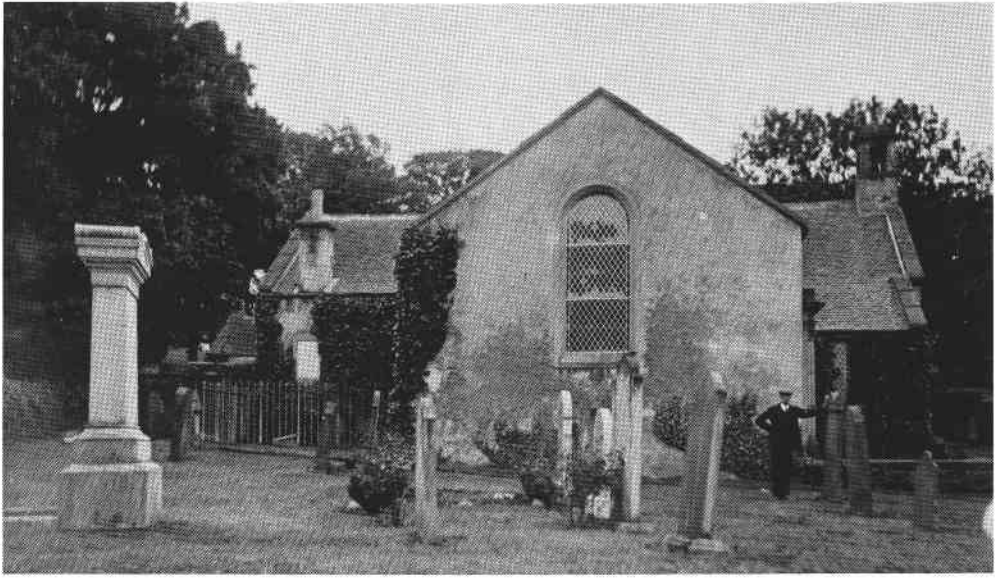
Before the 1960s Muir's religion was hardly a subject of controversy. Even those who might have quibbled over the appropriate sub-classification could agree that Muir's theology was fundamentally Christian. In Muir's lifetime, his friends and relatives had no problem defining the broad outlines of his religious outlook. Overwhelmingly if not exclusively Christian themselves, they never questioned the orthodox fundamentals of his faith even if they may have occasionally quarrelled over the details. Robert Underwood Johnson, a Scotch-Irish Presbyterian, said Muir's theology remained essentially Calvinist.² William F. Badè, son of Moravian immigrants and Professor of Old Testament Literature and Semitic Languages at Pacific Theological Seminary (later Pacific School of Religion), implied that Muir's belief in a loving Creator-God kept him from succumbing to the prevailing materialist mood which Badè characterized as "unrationalized anthropocentrism."³

Almost everyone agrees that Muir was deeply religious. Religious terms and symbols characterize his writings so distinctively that even his crusty friend John Burroughs complained that "All his streams and waterfalls and avalanches and storm-buffed trees sing songs, or hymns, or psalms, or rejoice in some other proper Presbyterian manner. . . ."⁴ The problem, of course, is not simply to identify religious word associations but to extrapolate meaning from them. Muir himself complicated matters by sidestepping religious issues in public, and his writings are metaphorical and vague, leaving modern scholars with the task of deducing the nature of Muir's theology from the raw materials and memories he left behind.

Muir's writing style also complicates the search for religious meaning. A talented but eclectic writer, he borrowed ideas and phrases from the books he read, reshaping and rephrasing and otherwise remaking words to suit his own style. Anything he had written earlier was also fair game for revision and reincorporation into a derivative work. The Muir manuscript series contain a number of derivative articles whose provenance can be traced back at least to an early newspaper or journal article. These later drafts reflect the fine-tuning of a polished phrase-maker, and in most cases he altered the descriptive verbiage rather than the key idea. Hence Muir's published works contain a potpourri of old and new ideas and phrases from a variety of sources which may not reflect subtle theological changes in his own thinking. By carefully comparing his published works with his unpublished notes and correspondence we stand a better chance of avoiding egregious analytical errors than if we relied on published writings alone.

II. MUIR AND THE CHRISTIAN HERITAGE

The year after Muir's death S. Hall Young, Protestant missionary and his longtime friend, described Muir as a "devout theist. The Fatherhood of God and the Unity of God, the immanence of God in nature and His management of all the affairs of the universe, was his constantly reiterated belief."⁵ Muir probably would not have objected to this characterization, but it is too generalized to be very meaningful. Belief in a Creator-God, however defined, characterizes most of the world's religious beliefs, ancient or modern, Christian or pagan. The real question is whether he was able to reconcile his wilderness philosophy with his Christian underpinnings, as Young and other early biographers contend, or whether he rejected Christianity altogether in favor of a pagan world view, as Stephen Fox's recent biography asserts.⁶



Spott Kirk in Dunbar, Scotland. One of the many churches to which Muir's father, Daniel, probably brought his family as he explored various denominations.

Leaving the apostasy question for later, let us begin with the Christianization of the youthful Muir, the young John of Dunbar and Wisconsin whose personal history is tellingly revealed in *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth*. Hounded and literally pounded by his authoritarian father, he learned the Bible and the wondrous workings of the Great Scotch God the hard way. Considering the length and severity and monotonous regimentation of this training, it is not difficult to understand why Muir was a doctrinaire and evangelical Calvinist at least until the age of 22. In 1856, when he was 18, he wrote a religious essay in the form of a letter to Bradley Brown, a family friend, which sets forth the fundamentals of his Christian orthodoxy:

... Jesus is the Son of God, 'By him the worlds were made. By him all things consist.' He it is who seeks you and suffers for you to save you. . . . O dear friend let us give our hearts to Christ our Savior and love him and follow in his footsteps forever. Then however far we may be separated while we each follow our destiny here, we shall meet again above the region of storms in that bright mansion of the blessed[.] The home of our Saviour & Father to part again no more forever.⁷

The Divinity of Jesus, Incarnation, Redemption and Resurrection, Salvation and Immortality: all the essential Christian dogmas appear in this one passage. He grew up firmly entrenched in the bedrock of Calvinist Christianity, and if he later glanced over the parapet he did so with trepidation — not out of fear of his father but, in good Christian conscience, out of concern for his soul. He left home in part to escape his father's rule, not his father's religion. If his religious views later diverged, they changed as a result of personal maturity, not youthful rebellion.

The Madison years and the whirl of new ideas in an unsheltered environment tested but did not dislodge his faith. In early letters to friends and relatives he chronicled his spiritual trials. "I am now adrift on this big sinners world and I dont know how I feel," he told sister Sarah.⁸ "There is much here to lead me away from God," he later confided

to his brother-in-law.⁹ Yet these temptations, if anything, ultimately reinforced his convictions. Rather than join the devil he led a local Christian crusade as president of the Madison YMCA.¹⁰ Muir left college in 1863 emotionally and spiritually unscathed.

It was not the University of Wisconsin but, as he phrased it, the University of the World that altered Muir's view of Christianity. Yet recent Muir biographers have misread the extent of that alteration. Muir never rebuilt the orthodox foundation of his youth, but tinkered with the superstructure during the rebellious middle period from 1868 to 1880 — the young bachelor years of the 1,000 Mile Walk and the Sierra explorations. After 1880, family, fame, and fortune combined to moderate even some of his more outspoken earlier views. It is noteworthy that in 1887 he laboriously copied in longhand his sermon to Brad Brown delivered thirty years before, when he was still under his father's wing in Wisconsin. Later to record for posterity the pious preachings of childhood innocence is hardly the act of an alienated believer.

Muir was indeed a religious critic — his personal library and his unpublished writings and notes, if not his printed words, leave an extensive and unmistakable trail of words and cognitive signs. But it was not Christianity he attacked; it was the denominational dogma that had grown up around it. Like Milton — one of his heroes, whose likeness he kept in the family album — Muir shed his denominational garments and became a Christian independent.¹¹ Jeanne Carr noted the change as early as 1866 when she complimented his “power of insight into Nature” and praised his “individualized acceptance of religious truth.”¹²



Portrait of Milton from Muir's photograph album.

The failure to differentiate between Christian apostasy and anti-denominationalism has been the bane of most of Muir's recent biographers. Michael Cohen, like Stephen Fox earlier, makes the mistake of assuming that during the 1,000 Mile Walk Muir tossed out the baby with the bath water when he rejected “the false and abstract doctrines of Christianity.”¹³ He goes on to claim that Muir proverbially, if not literally, junked the Bible along the “pathless way,”¹⁴ although that makes it hard to explain why his personal

library, now housed at the University of the Pacific, contains at least four well-worn Bibles, including two with holograph annotations. Herbert Smith's biography also recognized the religious radicalism of the 1,000 Mile Walk journal, but stopped short of asserting that Muir abandoned all of his earlier beliefs.¹⁵

Both Muir's writings and his personal library notes provide extensive anti-denominational documentation. One reason Muir never attended church after leaving Wisconsin was to escape the pompous pieties of petty dogmatists, as the quote heading this essay implies, not to abandon all forms of institutional religion, as Cohen infers.¹⁶ Dogmatic hairsplitters drove him to a frenzy, as his brother David found out after reporting a local row over various sacramental practices. Muir's reply fairly dripped with scorn:

I do not like the doctrine of close communion as held by hard shells, because the whole clumsy structure of the thing rests upon a foundation of coarse-grained dogmatism. . . . Imperious, bolt upright exclusiveness upon any subject is hateful, but it becomes absolutely hideous & impious in matters of religion. . . . I have no patience at all for the man who complacently wipes his pious lips & waves me away from a simple rite which commemorates the love & sacrifice of Christ . . . not for want of Christian love on my part, or the practice of self denying virtues in seeking to elevate myself, but simply because in his infallible judgement I am mistaken in the number of quarts of that common liquid we call water which should be made use of in baptism. . . .¹⁷

Sectarian dogmatism surfaced in school as well as in the pulpit, Muir noted. Remembering the Dunbar days, Muir chided Catharine Merrill for attending an unidentified church school:

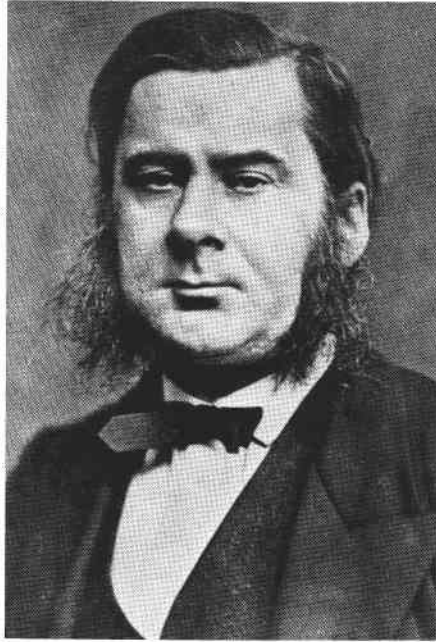
I glanced at the regulations, order, etc. in the catalog wh[ich] you sent, and the grizzly thorny ranks of cold enslaving "musts" made me shudder as I fancy I should had I looked into a dungeon of the olden times full of rings and thumbscrews and iron chains. You deserve great credit for venturing into such a place. None but an Indiana Prof. would dare the dangers of such a den of ecclesiastical slave-drivers. I suppose that you were moved to go among those flint Christians by the same motives of philanthrop[h]y wh[ich] urged you amongst other forms of human depravity.¹⁸

Muir agreed with the sentiments of Thomas Huxley that children should be taught "the great truths of Christian life and conduct," not "theological dogmas which their tender age prevents them from understanding."¹⁹

Taken in the context of his times, and weighed against the total thrust of his written work, I maintain that Muir was no Christian apostate but a Christian reformer who believed the doctrinal core of the early Church had been corrupted. This was a theme which even predated Luther, and like Luther, Muir denounced the false prophets, medieval and modern, who had strayed from the True Faith. Muir found Thomas Huxley's remark particularly apt: "I have a great respect for the Nazarenism of Jesus — very little for later 'Christianity.'"²⁰

But corruption assumed many forms and guises. The dogmatists were no more guilty than the materialists who had traded Christian virtue for a pot of fool's gold. To Muir, as to other primitivists, the western world had squandered its natural heritage, not as a result of Biblical dominion theory but because of the adverse consequences of western civilization, particularly in its modern, industrialized form. The pursuit of profit, the race for riches, the madcap march across the world's wilderness frontiers — all sprang from the false idols of greed and exploitation. Religion might well disappear in such an

atmosphere. On the decline of the True Church and the evils of materialism, if not on aesthetic theory, Muir agreed with Ruskin that "England now worships God Mammon." Doubtless Muir thought the same of the United States.²¹



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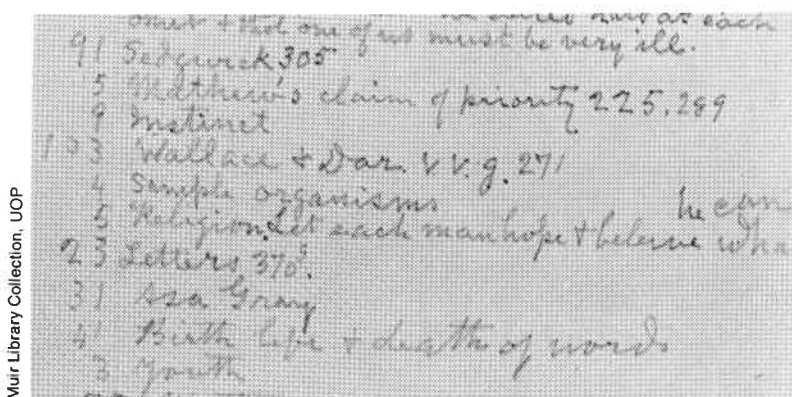
Thomas Huxley

III. CHRISTIANITY AND CREATIONISM

Muir's place in the modern environmental movement rests on the presumption that his thinking is modernist, that his environmental philosophy is compatible with the empirical findings of modern science. Often cited to support this notion is Muir's defense of Darwin during the evolution-creation controversy that raged in the 1870s and that has recently resurfaced.²² Yet like so many other aspects of Muir's psychic history, his views on evolution and creation have not been clearly articulated in the literature. Older biographers identified him as a creationist, while modern scholars place him in the evolutionist camp.

It should be clear from the outset that the modern debate is quite distinct from its nineteenth century antecedents. We must be careful not to confuse Muir's views with those that have come to characterize either the creationist dogmas of modern fundamentalists or the equally dogmatic assertions of what one scholar has termed the "evolutionary naturalists."²³ Like Asa Gray, Alfred Russell Wallace and other nineteenth century scientists who accepted creation doctrine, but unlike doctrinaire modern creationists, Muir saw no conflict between the "discovered truths of evolution" and the "glorious creations of God."²⁴ Neither did he "leave the comprehension of nature entirely to science," as seems to be the inclination of modern empiricists.²⁵ Muir's creation theology represents the middle ground of post-Darwinian religious rationalism, a blend of empirical science and Judaeo-Christian metaphysics.

Muir personally admired Darwin's work and even felt compelled to defend it against the "silly, ignorant, and unbelieving men who say much about Darwinism without really knowing anything about it."²⁶ The 1878 date of this defense is significant, for it was during the 1870s that the evolution controversy expanded beyond the early storm over man-ape linkage and began to deal with the larger question of causes. Muir accepted the principle of natural selection as it applied to physical change, but on the larger issue he believed the post-Darwinists had misinterpreted the words of their hero. One remark by Darwin's son, Francis, Muir found especially apt: "[Darwin] considers that the theory of Evolution is quite compatible with the belief in a God; but . . . you must remember that different persons have different definitions of what they mean by God."²⁷ Muir also underscored Darwin's "inward conviction," reiterated in late life and read by his California admirer when Muir was also nearing the last years, that ". . . the Universe is not the result of chance."²⁸



Muir Library Collection, UOP

Portion of an index handwritten by Muir in the back of a volume of the *Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* by Francis Darwin. This notation refers to a passage in a letter Charles Darwin wrote to Asa Gray on May 22, [1860], in which he discusses the question of theology.

As a selective evolutionist, Muir adopted Darwinian theory and metaphorically applied it to the entire physical world. The analogy of evolution reinforced his geologic theories on the origins of Yosemite, in contrast to other creationists who viewed catastrophism as part of the Divine Plan.²⁹ But Muir understood evolution to mean not random change but continuous, ongoing creation by a Divine Inventor. "World building never was carried on more energetically than it is today[.] In the Divine Calander [sic] this is still the morning of Creation," he wrote on a scrap of paper in 1870.³⁰

If Muir's Inventor-God was no six-day wonder who eternally rested thereafter, neither was he an indifferent and mechanistic master craftsman, or remote First Cause in the Deist tradition. The Divine Inventor constantly watched over his creation. Witness the miraculous wild sheep, "the climber that never falls, & fears no precipice. . . ." To Muir this testified not to an impersonal God but a personable, anthropomorphic Deity, a Yosemite Zeus in overalls: ". . . the divine Inventor stands revealed as a fellow workman & rejoicing in his Creators success he shouts Well done! in congratulation as if he were a man."³¹

Note the causational implications of the Divine Inventor imagery. Muir never rejected the humanistic world view of western Christianity even if he challenged the egocentric drift of its modern practitioners. He found little in common between his own activist, personal theology and the passive, impersonal cosmology of the Orient. The "eastern way of liberation," to use Alan Watts' phrase,³² has profoundly influenced the psychological underpinnings of the modern environmental movement, yet Muir is not a good candidate for posthumous ordination in the brotherhood of Gurus. His distinctive and unadulterated Occidental mentality is reflected in both his published and unpublished writings as well as in the margin notes of the books he read on the Orient. He was both critical and highly selective, condoning only those Eastern ideas he found compatible and condemning the rest. Remarking on "Prayer in Tibet," for example, he wrote: "... No thoughts of Gods or mon[a]ster[ie]s such as fill the Himalaya for the only God all Father so visible precludes the ignorance of mystery in wh[ic]h they dwell. . . ."³³ Near the end of his life, as he contemplated the biography of Lafcadio Hearn, a professed atheist who had studied Shinto and said Christianity was "far more irrational than Buddhism," Muir had a terse response: "Creed Godless."³⁴

Darwinism appealed to Muir not only because of its compatibility with his own empirical field studies but also because of its metaphysical implications. Natural selection directly challenged the arrogant and misguided anthropocentrism that had come to characterize modern Western attitudes toward nature. Even if he went farther than Louis Agassiz in accepting natural selection, as Michael Cohen has suggested,³⁵ Muir agreed with both Agassiz and Wallace that evolution does not explain "higher spiritual and intellectual phenomena."³⁶ Creationists could not leave the moral progress of humanity to chance even if they might allow random changes in the physical world. In Wallace's words, "[B]eyond all the phenomena of nature and their immediate causes and laws there is Mind and Purpose."³⁷

But hypothesizing God's role in human moral development left the creationists ambivalent about where Divine will ended and human will began. If forged in the Divine furnace by an infallible hand like other creatures, humans were by definition perfect. Muir and other creationists recognized the logic of Agassiz's view that "... everything that God has made is perfect of its kind and in its place, though relatively lower or higher. . . ."³⁸ This was a slightly revised version of the Aristotelian principle of unilinear gradation, the classification of all temporal creatures by degree of "perfection," with man at the top of a hierarchy that started with the lowest or least complex of life forms.³⁹ Aristotelian science thus reinforced Christian anthropocentrism. Now humans were both higher and superior than other earthly beings.⁴⁰ But just how superior was an open question for much of Christian history. From St. Augustine to William Ellery Channing the idea of human perfectibility was buried under the weight of original sin.⁴¹

In the nineteenth century, the Romantic-Unitarian-universalist challenge to medieval Christian orthodoxy revived the perfectionalist vision of the early Church.⁴² Yet John Muir — though profoundly influenced by the New England reformers — could never quite reconcile the utopian vision of human perfection with the imperfect realities he observed on the American frontier. From Wisconsin to California to Alaska, instead of noble savages and Natty Bumpos, he found ravaged lands, rotting stumps and heaping slag piles, the dismal residue of an era of exploitation by Americans alienated from nature and corrupted by civilization. Even the Indians were morally bankrupt — hopeless "diggers" reduced to begging and prostitution. Such were the fruits of "progress"! Muir's experiences contributed to the primitivist bent of his thinking. At times they also turned

his thoughts back to the old lessons of his youth, the dark moral strictures of hellfire-and-brimstone Christianity. In an uncharacteristically somber mood he wrote J. B. McChesney from his Yosemite garret above Hutchings' Mill:

I don't agree with you in saying that in all human minds there is poetry. Man as he came from the hand of his Maker was poetic in both mind and body, but the gross heathenism of civilization has generally destroyed nature, and poetry, and all that is spiritual. I am tempted at times to adopt the Calvinic doctrine of total depravity. . . . But all have not bowed the knee to the earthly gold of Baal. The Lord has a natural Elect, people whose affinities unite them to the rest of nature, and I think that you are one.⁴³

But this is not the typical Muir, the effervescent and optimistic writer of *My First Summer in the Sierra* and *Mountains of California*. Much more common are his nature hymns, his polished essays adorned with colorful metaphors and singing superlatives. These celebrated his unshakable faith in a Creator-God both transcendent and immanent — personally and majestically transcending the universe, yet spiritually immanent and indwelling, both in nature and man. This was essentially New Testament monotheism geared to a belief in Divine Love as the ruling principle of creation.⁴⁴

Muir used the Divine Love trope more frequently than perhaps any other religious metaphor. Taking issue with a morose Ruskin essay on mountain scenery, he deplored remarks which indicated a disbelief in the "consistency and sufficiency and everlastingness of God's Love as written in nature. . . . Christianity and Mountainanity are streams from the same fountain."⁴⁵ Urging Catharine Merrill to come West to enjoy the "Love fountains of God," he promised that in Yosemite she would discover that the trees and water and wind ". . . all sang of fountain love just as did Jesus Christ and all of pure God manifest in whatever form."⁴⁶ In a passage reminiscent of Emerson's famous *Nature* essay which evoked the metaphor of a "transparent eyeball," Muir found God's pulsating beauty and love everywhere:

All of God's Universe is glass to the soul of light. Infinitude [sic] mirrors reflecting all receiving all. The Stars whirl & eddy & boil in the currents of the ocean called space. . . . Trees in camplight & grasses & weeds impressive beyond thought so palpably Godful in form & in wind motion. . . . The pines spiring around me higher higher to the Star-flowered sky are plainly full of God. . . . Oh the infinite abundance & universality of Beauty. Beauty is God. What shall we say of God that we may not say of Beauty.⁴⁷

Despite the pantheistic tone of such writings, Muir consistently attributed nature's works to a higher source. Pantheism can either mean that God is the sum total of all things, or that all things are divine in themselves. Muir's view was quite different still. As he explained to Annie K. Bidwell:

Every creature belonging to God when lovingly studied leads up to himself along a way that ever becomes more & more brilliantly lighted; & no terrestrial way is more delightful to human feet than flowers. Never mind very much about your plants being new. They are all new, & every one of them is full of God.⁴⁸

Nature is thus not God but God Manifest, the material expression of Divine Love. Muir's debt to the Romantic Transcendentalists is apparent in this and similar passages. But his theological roots go deeper still. Eighteenth century Neoplatonists postulated a "Great Chain of Being," in A. O. Lovejoy's phrase, with a Creator-God at the apex.⁴⁹ In a remarkable passage that seems to anticipate Aldo Leopold, but which is closer to Plotinus, Muir formulated his own cosmic theory:

Man is so related to all of Nature, that he is builded of small worlds. When God made man "of the dust of the earth" he put into the compound fields & forests complete. All the Mtns ranges of the world. Suns & moons & all animals & plants & minerals. . . . Man is not only a Channel through wh[ic]h water flows, he is a bundle of worlds wh[ic]h lie calm untill [sic] stirred by the appearance of the material symbol. Thus "all of Nature is found in man." Squeeze all the universe into the size & shape of a perfect human soul & that is a whole man.⁵⁰

He reiterated the theme in a subsequent journal the next year:

What is "higher" what is "lower" in Nature? We speak of "higher" forms, higher types etc. in the fields of scientific inquiry. Now all of the individual "things" or "beings" into wh[ic]h the world is wrought are sparks of the Divine Soul variously clothed upon with flesh, leaves or that harder tissue called rock, water, etc. . . . The more extensively terrestrial a being becomes the higher it ranks among its fellows, & the most terrestrial being is the one that contains all of the others. Who has indeed flowed through all of the others & borne away part of them, building them all into itself. Such a being is man. . . .⁵¹

This blend of creationism and evolutionism, this integration of science and metaphysics, represents not the empiricism of a modern scientist but the dualism of a Romantic naturalist. Muir's God evolved along with the Platonic idea of the Highest Good; by the turn of the nineteenth century Romantic evolutionism came to predominate Neoplatonic thinking. God was no longer the remote Deity of Plato's *Republic* but the "this-worldly" God of Plato's *Timaeus*. Lovejoy could well have used John Muir's cosmology as a model in describing the value system that sustained nineteenth century Neoplatonic thought:

. . . a piety towards the God of things as they are, an adoring delight in the sensible universe in all its variety, an endeavor on man's part to know and understand it ever more fully, and a conscious participation in the divine activity of creation.⁵²

"Participation in the divine activity of creation": that is the central meaning of Muir's joyous ride down an avalanche; his reckless midnight baptism on a treacherous ledge just below the head of Yosemite Falls; his exuberant bounding over the still-quivering rocks of a "noble Yosemite earthquake"; and his "stormy sermon" in a windy treetop on the Yuba River.⁵³

IV. CHRISTIANITY AND MODERN ENVIRONMENTALISM

If Muir remained Christian throughout his life, how do we square his theology with his nature philosophy? And how do we reconcile the notion of a Christian Muir with the apparent anti-Christian drift of modern environmental thinking?

That Muir marks a turning-point in modern nature theology is well-known among Christian scholars. Kenneth Alpers noted a decade ago that Christianity and environmentalism began to part company only after Muir's time.⁵⁴ The split widened and deepened during the turbulent '60s and the wholesale attack on White Anglo-Saxon Protestant values. While anti-war activists and the New Left rallied against corporate democracy and the "imperial establishment," environmentalists criticized the adverse consequences of American material growth.⁵⁵ In the midst of this foment came Lynn

White's seminal essay blaming the Judaeo-Christian heritage for modern environmental ills.⁵⁶ If White's analysis was correct, Christianity and ecology were incompatible because, in White's words, "nature has no reason for existence save to serve man."⁵⁷

White's challenging thesis left Christian scholars scrambling for their concordances and Muir scholars anxious to reassess his place in the American environmental movement. The continued popularity of his published works, and the persistent association of his name with modern wilderness and environmental thinking, made the reassessment all the more urgent despite the lack of easy access to his correspondence and unpublished writings. If Christian values contributed to environmental decay, either Muir's religious outlook had nothing in common with his wilderness ideology, or his religious beliefs have been seriously misinterpreted. On the other hand, if White is wrong, then we may be able to reconcile Christianity and Muir and even find a place for them in the modern environmental movement.

Today, after more than a decade of Biblical exegesis, the picture is much clearer. Judaeo-Christian scholars have parried White's provocative but erroneous attempt to pin the blame for modern environmental ills on the Genesis command to "multiply and subdue the earth." Their rejoinder argues that Biblical tradition does not justify environmental exploitation; that both text and tradition assert the primacy and transcendence of a loving Creator-God who values all of creation. Taken in this context, Biblical passages emphasizing human dominion must be tempered by passages recognizing humans as fellow creatures responsible for protecting and cultivating the land and its inhabitants, both human and non-human. Stewardship and self-restraint, rather than arrogance and exploitation, are the true environmental ethics of the Judaeo-Christian tradition.⁵⁸

These same ethical principles are thoroughly embedded in the nature philosophy of John Muir. The Romantic veneer and the symbolism in his own writings have caused some problems of interpretation a hundred years later. But when the products of his own pen are supplemented with the thoughts he expressed through the language of others, the totality of his message becomes abundantly clear. He found the meaning of life in a cosmic equation that balanced divine creation and love with universal harmony and human happiness. Part of the equation Muir expressed in an 1872 unpublished essay entitled "Mountainanity, Reciprocal Action of Men and Mountains":

... like a stream . . . falling through the sky in rain or snow & flowing down the mtn absorbs a portion of all it touches & gives voice to all its fountains, so man flowing through nature contains a portion of everything & recognizes himself in landscapes & thrills with mysterious sympathy to their every touch. . . . The expressions of God in Nature cannot mean love to one hate to another. The sermon of Jesus on the Mount is on every mount & every valley besides, unmistakable joy & confidence beams from mtn flrs redeeming the storms that fall upon them & the mtns on wh[ic]h they grow from dominion of fear to love. They are great strong tremendously fateful John Baptists proclaiming the Gospel of harmonious love in the cold realms of ice.⁵⁹

Explaining the human element in Muir's metaphorical mathematics required an ethical concept implied above but fully expressed in Alfred Wallace's last great creationist defense, *The World of Life*. Reading the book late in life, Muir found in it a reiteration of his own views on the role of mankind in the modern world. If man desires eternal happiness he must responsibly care for the earth and all its creatures. Stewardship was thus a cardinal rule that protected nature from human dominance; the rise of exploitation and materialism distorted Christianity and culminated in "crimes against God and man."⁶⁰

While these are familiar sentiments to those acquainted with Biblical stewardship doctrine,⁶¹ both Muir and Wallace saw in stewardship not only a rationale for conservation but also a justification for what this author likes to call, somewhat ironically, Christian humanism. The Muir quotation above incorporated a symbolic reference to God's Love as expressed in the Sermon on the Mount.⁶² The central message of the Sermon is anthropocentric: man, as the highest order of creation, uses nature responsibly for human ends. Far from rejecting that doctrine, Muir personified Sermon scripture in his concern for both the natural environment and the people that inhabit it. His personal lifestyle seemed patterned after Sermon teachings on such things as Christian Witness, Virtue, Pacifism, Charity, Private Worship, Modesty, Humility, Non-utilitarianism, and Pastoralism. In criticizing the moral bankruptcy of modern, industrial Christianity, Muir joined the call for Christian reform and echoed the words of fellow-creationist Alfred Wallace: "Let us hope that the twentieth century will see the rise of a truer religion, a purer Christianity. . . ." in which morality prevails over money-making, exploitation gives way to equity, and life's values are measured by quality instead of quantity.⁶³ Closer to nineteenth century social gospel advocate Walter Rauschenbush in both time and spirit than to eighteenth century Puritan theologian Jonathan Edwards, Muir was a Christian activist whose preoccupation with nature's religious symbols did not overshadow his focus on Christian moral purpose.⁶⁴ Unlike some modern cult-followers who have turned away from life's cares and responsibilities in a mystical search for perfection, John Muir, to use John Passmore's phrase, "never ceased to be human."⁶⁵

Muir's Christian humanism had a dual objective: to serve God both in nature and in society. His lifestyle and his principles mark him as an exemplary Christian, a model for modern times. This is not to imply that contemporary Christianity and modern environmentalism are totally compatible. Even if Lynn White's aim was wild, his essay shot holes in the crassly anthropocentric garments of modern Judaeo-Christian culture. John Muir essentially did the same thing nearly a century before even though he did it in the name of a purer form of Christianity. Of course Judaeo-Christian culture is not the same as Christianity, and Christianity itself is not a single religion or belief-system. It is rather a "mixed collection of ideas," in Lovejoy's phrase,⁶⁶ without much in common except the term. That is why millions of human beings today continue both to love and to hate fellow human beings, to make war and peace, to preserve nature and destroy it, all in the name of Christ. Regardless of our religious beliefs, sanity if not civilization itself compels us to heed the timely words of both John Muir and modern environmentalists.

NOTES:

1. John Muir to Daniel Muir, Jr., 17 Apr 1869, in John Muir Papers, UOP, 00442.
2. Robert Underwood Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1923), p. 286.
3. William F. Badè, "Nature and Religion in the Thought of John Muir," *Homiletic Review*, 88 (1924): 12. See also Wm. F. Colby, "William Frederic Badè, 1871-1936," *Sierra Club Bulletin*, 22 (1936), reprint; and William B. Rice, "A Synthesis of Muir Criticism," *Sierra Club Bulletin*, 28 (June, 1943): 92.
4. John Burroughs, "John Muir's Yosemite," *Literary Digest*, 1912, as quoted in Rice, "Synthesis of Muir Criticism," 92.
5. S. Hall Young, *Alaska Days with John Muir* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1915), p. 97.
6. Stephen Fox, *John Muir and His Legacy: The American Conservation Movement* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1981), pp. 50-53, 358-373.
7. John Muir to A. Bradley Brown, 1856, holograph copy in JM notebook, ca. 1887, JM Papers, UOP, 00082.
8. John Muir to Sarah Galloway, ca. 1-13 October 1860, JM Papers, UOP, 00240.
9. John Muir to Sarah & David Galloway, ca. 1-21 December 1860, JM Papers, UOP, 00248.
10. John Muir to Sarah & David Galloway, 1 June 1863, 00328, and John Muir to Mr. & Mrs. Ambrose Newton, 2 August 1863, 00336, both JM Papers, UOP.
11. See John Muir holograph marginalia beside the Milton chapter in H.A. Taine's *History of English Literature*. Abridged ed. (New York: Holt, 1876), p. 207, in Muir library collection, UOP. Hereafter citations to all works containing Muir holograph marks and notes are cited as MLC, UOP.
12. Jeanne Carr to John Muir, 12 Oct 1866, JM Papers, UOP, 00381.
13. Michael P. Cohen, *The Pathless Way: John Muir and the American Wilderness* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), p. 25.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 150.
15. Herbert F. Smith, *John Muir* (New York: Twayne, 1965), pp. 42-49.
16. *The Pathless Way*, p. 150.
17. John Muir to David G. Muir, 10 April 1870, JM Papers, UOP, 00505.
18. John Muir to Catharine Merrill, 12 July 1871, JM Papers, UOP, 00547.
19. See marginal notes in Thomas Huxley, *Life and Letters*, vol. 2 (New York: Appleton, 1900), p. 367, MLC, UOP.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 361.
21. See Muir marginalia in John Ruskin, *Aratra Pentelici* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1886), p. 44, MLC, UOP.
22. For an excellent review of the current literature, see *National Forum*, 43 (Spring, 1983).
23. Carl F.H. Henry, "The Modern Evasion of Creation," *National Forum*, 45 (Winter 1985): 39-41.
24. John Muir to Annie K. Bidwell, 28 March 1878, 00781.
25. C.F.H. Henry, "The Modern Evasion of Creation," p. 40.
26. John Muir to Annie K. Bidwell, 1 Feb 1878, JM Papers, UOP, 00770.
27. *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin, Including an Autobiographical Chapter*, ed. Francis Darwin (New York & London: Appleton, 1911), vol. 1, p. 277, and endnotes, MLC, UOP.
28. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 285.
29. See Muir holograph margin marks in H. Alleyne Nicholson, *The Ancient Life-History of the Earth* (New York: Appleton, 1878), pp. 3-7, MLC, UOP.
30. Philosophy & Religion, holograph ms. ca. 1870, JM Papers, UOP, 08514.
31. John Muir manuscript ca. 1872, JM Papers, UOP, 08648.
32. See Alan Watts, *Psychotherapy East and West* (New York: Vintage, c1961, 1975).
33. Muir holograph note inside back cover of Andrew Wilson, *The Abode of Snow: Observations on a Tour from Chinese Tibet to the Indian Caucasus, Through the Upper Valleys of the Himalaya* (New York: Putnam's, 1875), MLC, UOP. See also marginalia on pp. 244-245.
34. Muir holograph marginalia and end notes in Edward Thomas, *Lafcadio Hearn* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1912), MLC, UOP. For an example of parallels between Muir writings and Taoism, see John Muir manuscript ca. 1872, JM Papers, UOP, 08603. Muir's limited understanding of Hinduism is suggested by his margin notes beside a passage in Thoreau's *Journal*, v. 2, 1906 ed., MLC, UOP. See also Muir marginalia and end notes in Thomas DeQuincey, *Essays on Philosophical Writers and Other Men of Letters* (Boston: Ticknor & Fields, 1862), MLC, UOP.
35. *The Pathless Way*, pp. 175-176.
36. Alfred R. Wallace, *The World of Life: A Manifestation of Creative Power, Personal Directive Mind and Ultimate Purpose* (New York: Moffat, Yard & Co., 1911), p. 359, MLC, UOP.

37. Ibid., p. 299.
38. Louis Agassiz, *Methods of Study in Natural History* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1896), p. 88, MLC, UOP.
39. A.O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (Cambridge, MA: Harper Torchbooks, c1936, 1948), pp. 55-61.
40. Ibid., p. 61.
41. John Passmore, *The Perfectibility of Man* (New York: Scribner's, 1970), p. 93.
42. Ibid.
43. John Muir to J.B. McChesney, 19 September 1871, JM Papers, UOP, 00450.
44. For a modern version of Christian nature theology see Kenneth P. Alpers, "Toward an Environmental Ethic," *Dialog* 15 (1: Winter 1976): 49-55.
45. John Muir to J.B. McChesney, 9 January 1873, JM Papers, UOP, 00195.
46. John Muir to Catharine Merrill, 9 June 1872, JM Papers, UOP, 00599.
47. John Muir journal 1872, pp. 3-6, JM Papers, UOP, 00006.
48. JM to Annie K. Bidwell, 11 September 1878, JM Papers, UOP, 00811.
49. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, pp. 59-61.
50. John Muir journal 1872, p. 128, JM Papers, UOP, 00006. The passage also bears some resemblance to the "correspondences" of Emanuel Swedenborg. The Muir Library Collection at UOP contains at least three Swedenborgian works.
51. John Muir journal, 1873, JM Papers, UOP, 00077.
52. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, p. 316.
53. The sermon metaphor is from Cohen, *Pathless Way*, pp. 142-144.
54. Alpers, "Toward an Environmental Ethic," p. 51. The reasons have been so well recounted by a host of modern scholars that it would be both pointless and redundant to repeat them here. For some of the more useful recent surveys, see Fox, *John Muir and His Legacy*; Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (third edition; New Haven: Yale University Press, c1967, c1982); Rice Odell, *Environmental Awakening: The New Revolution to Protect the Earth* (Cambridge, MA: Harper & Row, c1980).
55. For a brief summary of the counter-culture impact on modern environmental thinking, see Raymond F. Dasmann, "Conservation, Counter-culture, and Separate Realities" *Environmental Conservation*, 1 (Summer 1974): 133-137.
56. Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science*, March 10, 1967, reprinted in Duke Frederick et al., *Destroy to Create* (Hinsdale, IL: Dryden Press, 1972), pp. 2-11.
57. Ibid., p. 11.
58. For analyses of recent findings, see Robin Attfield, "Christian Attitudes to Nature," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 44 (July-September, 1983), 369-386; Richard H. Hiers, "Ecology, Biblical Theology, and Methodology: Biblical Perspectives on the Environment," *Zygon*, 19 (March, 1984), 43-59; Alpers, "Toward an Environmental Ethic."
59. John Muir holograph manuscript, 1872, JM Papers, UOP, 06792.
60. Wallace, *The World of Life*, p. 301.
61. For an explanation of stewardship as part of the "covenant ethic," see William F. May, "On Slaying the Dragon: the American Nature Myth," *Katallagete*, 7 (Winter, 1981): 29-35; *ibid.*, 8 (Summer 1982): 29-38.
62. Muir repeatedly used direct Sermon references in his writings and notes. See also Muir journal 1872, 00006, and Mountaineering book draft, ca. 1910, 08456, in JM Papers, UOP; Muir holograph note inside back cover of Thomas DeQuincey, *The Avenger, a Narrative; and Other Papers* (Boston: Ticknor & Fields, 1859; vol. 21 of *Writings*), MLC, UOP.
63. Wallace, *The World of Life*, pp. 299-302.
64. For the ascetic tradition in Christian theology see Conrad Cherry, *Nature and Religious Imagination from Edwards to Bushnell* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, c1980), pp. 231-236. See also Muir holograph endnotes and margin marks on page 152 in John Ruskin, *Ethics of the Dust*, 2nd ed. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1886), MLC, UOP.
65. Passmore, *The Perfectibility of Man*, pp. 302-326.
66. *Great Chain of Being*, p. 6.



View of Yosemite Valley from Inspiration Point. Photograph by Edward Parsons, 1900.