

A [sample entry](#) from the

Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature

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See *also*: Buddhism – Tibetan; Shamanism – Traditional; Tibet and Central Asia.

Book of Nature

“The Book of Nature” refers to the Christian concept of nature as a book, written by the hand of God and serving as a companion volume to the book of Scripture. With reference to this concept, the devout Christian is understood to be a faithful, attentive reader, studying both creation (the physical world made and sustained by God) and the Word (the Christian Bible, understood as the revealed word of God). For traditional Christian thinkers, the book of the Bible takes precedence as the source of revealed knowledge of God which serves as a means of grace for the faithful. The book of nature is secondary, a source of natural knowledge of God, available to human reason, but lacking a means of knowing the transcendent aspects of the divine. The art of reading the book of nature also lacks the requirements of faith and the possibilities of spiritual transformation that comes through divine revelation. Contemplation of nature may lead to the growth and refinement of one’s knowledge of God, but it is only God’s active work of self-revelation and grace that can perform the work of redemption on human beings. Studying the book of nature, however, has a certain democratic function because it is available to lettered and unlettered, churched and unchurched alike. Thus, attention to the book of nature may lead one to grow closer in knowledge and love of God, the Creator, and thus can spiritually prepare an individual for God’s redemptive work.

The importance of examining creation to understand the character and attributes of God is an ancient religious theme that informally reaches back to Rabbinic Judaism, as well as to earlier Ancient Israelite religious expression. The concept of “thinking back” from nature to God also draws on the Greek Platonic and Aristotelian traditions of reasoning by starting with the order of nature in order to then establish the character of divine beings or, in Plato’s case, of ideal forms. The traditional Christian view of creation builds on its Jewish heritage and its Hellenistic context, while also elaborating the concept of the Word (*Logos*) as the means through which physical creation is brought into being. The *logos* of scripture is thus conceptually linked to the physical world, which is also interpreted as a form of divine speech or divine text.

In the history of Christian thought, the notion of nature as a “book” finds vivid expression in the writings of Augustine of Hippo (354–430) who claimed that reading the book of nature directly was a more valuable means of knowing God than reading theological texts (though not more valuable than reading scripture itself). The metaphor of the book of nature persists into the twelfth century where the notion of nature as a book is reinvigorated by

Alain de Lille (1128–1202) and Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) who both emphasized the inherent orderliness in and purposive aspects of nature. For Aquinas and Lille, nature is a system of fixed laws and secondary causes that reveal an intelligent creator and “Unmoved Mover” (God) who sets the forces of nature in motion.

Medieval scholastic theological discourses on creation and the “argument from design (in nature)” for the existence of God were complemented by more popular theological and literary traditions that emphasized each aspect of nature as having symbolic significance with respect to God’s character or the aspirations of virtuous Christians. Medieval emblem books and bestiaries described the natural world through a Christian theological lens, with animals representing particular vices, virtues or doctrines, such as the goat representing the sin of lust, the glow worm symbolizing the light of the Holy Spirit and the caterpillar representing the resurrection of Christ. In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe, the popularity of emblem books grew such that texts about the (symbolically Christian) natural world developed side by side with ever more popular representations of nature as a Christian text. In this same period, natural theology reached new heights of popularity, influencing the development of natural science, first as a means of acquiring greater knowledge and understanding of God and later as a discipline in its own right, with or without reference to a divine creator.

In the American setting, the view of nature as God’s book flowered in the context of a new environmental setting that was both bountiful and frightening to European colonial eyes. This new physical surround, coupled with a long-standing intellectual tradition of “reading” nature, led to a rich theological and literary production emerging from the contemplation of nature’s meanings. The tradition of the book of nature persisted in both liberal and orthodox Protestant thought. The Puritan leader Cotton Mather urged his readers to walk in the “Publick Library (sic)” of nature in order to read about the character of God, and Jonathan Edwards saw in nature “images and shadows” of the divine, interpreting thunderstorms and rainbows symbolically, as had the emblemists before him. Later, in liberal theological contexts, the tradition of interpreting nature slowly became divorced from traditional Christian theology. The rise of deism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries fostered attention on nature itself with a concept of God as a great Architect or Watchmaker, and nature as a building or machine that, once set in motion by God, contained laws and processes that could be independently understood and, ideally, controlled. Deism itself created a precedent that led some to a wholly atheistic reading of nature’s book, with the hope and expectation of discerning nature’s own laws and processes and nothing more. This intellectual shift may have led to a greater scientific knowledge and appreciation for nature,

but also established the groundwork for the intellectual and physical control of nature that has led to technological innovation, but also ecological destruction.

In the late eighteenth and nineteenth century, and in partial reaction to the Enlightenment view of nature's book, philosophers and writers participating in the rise of Romanticism in Germany and England also propagated the notion of nature as a "book," revitalizing the notion that nature contained hidden messages and meanings, though no longer those of Christian doctrine. For the European Romantics and the American Transcendentalists, nature could be "read" for insight into the (often post-Christian) divine, but was also studied for knowledge of the self and as a means of cultivating the imagination. The Romantic ideal of the Poet-Seer posited a visionary who was specially equipped to "read" nature and then, through use of the Imagination, transform the messages of nature into literature that would bring "nature's book" to the attention of other readers. In this context, nature still served as a kind of cryptogram, but the message was no longer strictly theological, but more broadly metaphysical, existential and psychological.

The Romantic tradition has played a vital role in developing a legacy of nature appreciation in Europe and America, although the legacy is a complex one and not wholly positive. Among the negative legacies are the connections made (particularly in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) between Romantic nature appreciation and certain forms of European nationalism. The Fascist movement in Germany is the darkest example of the ways in which pastoral themes in the art and literature of German romanticism were exploited to nationalistic purpose. The pursuit of a redemptive and "pure" rural Germany was linked to the concept of establishing a pure German race. German Romanticism was one of many "background theories" in the growth of National Socialism, but it is undeniable that anti-Semitism developed hand-in-hand with popular celebrations of German country life. The concept of the book of nature, then, was not always beneficent.

Contemporary eco-theology has revived interest in nature as a "book" to be studied. Twenty-first-century eco-theologians recognize, however, that too much attention to nature's book without attention to divine creative forces historically played a role in the rise of Enlightenment science that fostered a mechanistic and sometimes destructive attitude toward the natural world. Aware of this history, writers such as Sallie McFague, James Nash, John Cobb and Calvin Dewitt argue for the careful study of nature as a way to foster both knowledge and reverence for nature, but they also rearticulate modern versions of older Christian theological themes in which nature as "text" must always be seen in reference to its divine author. At the same time, these theologians also welcome a certain closing of the distance between the author and the

book. Their collective emphasis on divine immanence and action in creation suggests an author who is still producing and revising the text, a stance which resonates with – rather than stands against – much modern scientific thinking.

In the realm of ecological activism, also, the concept of "The Book of Nature" continues to be employed. The Religious Campaign for Forest Conservation, for instance, sponsors "Book of Nature" retreats that invite Christians and Jews to spend time in wilderness settings and discern what the wilderness might teach, as mediated by the religious traditions and orientations of participants. Such retreat experiences build on earlier American traditions of "open air" religion, including the founding of organizations (such as the Boy Scouts, the YMCA and Jewish camping associations) that use outdoor settings to foster religious insight and moral character. More recent experiential workshops, however, are often explicitly directed not only at gaining religious insight *through* nature study, but also at harnessing such insights for the sake of environmental protection. While the concept of nature's book is an ancient one, it clearly continues to be revitalized and reinterpreted (particularly with ecological emphasis) in religious thought and practice today.

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Further Reading

- Albanese, Catherine. *Nature Religion in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.
- McFague, Sallie. *Super, Natural Christians*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg/Fortress, 1997.
- Glacken, Clarence. *Traces on the Rhodian Shore*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967.
- Thomas, Keith. *Man and the Natural World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983.
- See also: Deism; Ecofascism; Fascism; Natural Theology; Romanticism – in American Literature; Romanticism – in European Literature.

Boston Research Center for the 21st Century

The Boston Research Center for the 21st Century (BRC) is an international peace institute established in 1993. Its founder, Daisaku Ikeda, is a Buddhist peace activist and President of Soka Gakkai International (SGI), an association of Buddhist practitioners active in 163 countries. The Center brings together scholars and activists in dialogue on common values across cultures and religions, seeking in this way to support an evolving global ethic for a peaceful twenty-first century. Human rights, non-violence, environmental ethics, economic justice, and women's leadership for peace are focal points of the Center's work.