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# **Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature**

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Edited by

[Bron Taylor](#)

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Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. *Islam and Environmental Crisis*. In Steven C. Rockefeller and John C. Elder, eds. *Spirit and Nature*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992.

Rahman, Fazlur. *Major Themes of the Qur'an*. Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1994.

See *also*: Islam; Islam, Animals, and Vegetarianism; Islam on Man and Nature (and adjacent, Hadith and Shari'a on Man and Nature).

## 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 21 April 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 fueled the child's own capacities for sensual and imaginative contact with nature, infusing 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 immigrated 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 more liberal strands of nineteenth-century American Protestantism, including a religiously informed

openness to modern scientific, evolutionary, and humanitarian thought that would inform his outlook throughout his life. 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? (Muir 1997: 825–6)

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" (Muir in Holmes 1999: 213). His earlier intellectual reevaluation 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!*" (Muir in Holmes 1999: 220). Moreover, this communion with nature was an opening into communion with the divine: "I will fuse in spirit skies. I will touch naked God" (Muir in Holmes 1999: 238).

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, Alaska, and eventually the world. Casting about for a career during the 1870s, Muir wrote influential geological articles on the glacial origins of Yosemite Valley, travel

articles for local newspapers, and scientific studies of Californian trees; in 1879 he married Louie Strentzel, with whom he had two daughters (Helen and Wanda), soon settling into the life of a farmer in Martinez, California. By the end of the 1880s, 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 co-founder 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 (both evangelical and liberal), Muir's nature religion has been interpreted by later scholars in the light of a wide array of ideas and images: Transcendentalism, mysticism, Daoism, 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” (Muir 1997: 245). 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 4) a *biocentric* worldview, in which all living things, human or non-human, are valued as children of God; indeed, Muir goes further, consistently expanding the bounds of biocentrism to include “inanimate” objects such as rocks and rain as living elements of the divine creation. Finally, Muir reformulates the prophetic spirit of the Old Testament and the moralism of the New into 5) 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 religious elements of direct experience, ecological interconnection,

reverence, biocentrism, and activism to an ever-widening audience of environmentalists, nature lovers, scholars, scientists, and politicians.

At the same time, looking beneath the mythic figure, a critical perspective on Muir's biocentrism reveals an unexpected philosophical and social hierarchy, as his valuation of wild, untouched nature over humanly transformed landscapes was paralleled by a preference for middle-class, white tourists and adventurers over working people and non-white inhabitants. On the one hand, this outlook has served to justify the removal of Native Americans and other indigenous peoples in the process of *creating* “pure wilderness” out of formerly inhabited landscapes (as in many national parks, such as Yosemite and Yellowstone in the U.S.); on the other hand, Muir's influence helped allow the American conservation movement to virtually ignore inhabited and working landscapes (such as cities and farms) as objects of environmental concern over most of the twentieth century. Thus, Muir's wilderness ideals must be understood and critiqued as products of their cultural context at the same time as they may be valued as important and invigorating historical tools in the attempt to forge a larger and better vision of humanity in harmony with nature. Patron saint of modern 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.

Steven J. Holmes

#### Further Reading

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- See also: Animism (various); Biocentric Religion – A Call for; Deep Ecology; Miwok People; National Parks and Monuments (United States); Pinchot, Gifford; Scotland; Sierra Club; Wilderness Religion.