

John Muir Was a Pagan

"When we contemplate the whole globe as one great dewdrop, striped and dotted with continents and islands, flying through space with other stars all singing and shining together as one, the whole universe appears as an infinite storm of beauty."

~John Muir, *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth* (1913)

"Rocks and waters, etc., are words of God and so are men. We all flow from one fountain Soul. All are expressions of one Love. God does not appear, and flow out, only from narrow chinks and round bored wells here and there in favored races and places, but He flows in grand undivided currents, shoreless and boundless over creeds and forms and all kinds of civilizations and peoples and beasts, saturating all and fountainizing all."

~John Muir, *Letter to Catharine Merrill, Yosemite* (1872)

While John Muir (1838-1914) was not necessarily a worshipper of Nature he did often capitalize the word and seemed most "religious" when immersed in Nature's Beauty. In fact, his journals reflect his deep sentiment that Beauty itself (another word he capitalized) is the "perfect" "synonym for God" (June 26, 1875). Like all true mystics Muir had a way of weaving the semantics of a unique spiritual sense with common, even traditional terminology. For instance, in another passage from his journals he writes, "Linnaeus says Nature never leaps, which means that God never shouts or spouts or speaks incoherently. The rocks and sublime canyons, and waters and winds, and all life structures. . . are words of God, and they flow smooth and ripe from his lips" (August 1873). In *The Mountains of California* our sauntering man of the wilds describes the "mountain mansions" where "Nature had taken pains to gather her choicest treasures to draw her lovers into close and confiding communion with her" (p. 8—classic mystical language). Later, painting the grand picture of how the mountain ranges were formed, the leaping mountaineer says, "And in the development of these [mountains] Nature chose for a tool not the earthquake or lightning to rend and split asunder. . . but the tender snowflowers. . . . Few, however, of Nature's agents have left monuments so noble and enduring as they" (pp. 17-18). This serves to illustrate Muir's high reverence for Nature's creative force, not an archaic faith in some aloof deity in the heavens acting from on high upon the natural world. I would even say that Muir was thoroughly soaked in the river of pantheism (though I personally see no need to label his non-dualistic outlook). He saw absolutely no separation between the natural, the human and the divine. In my opinion, Muir was plunging into the cascade of Jesus' most basic life teaching ("the kingdom is within you"—Luke 17:21)—a far cry from any oft-stagnant pool of historic Christianity.

After a storm in the lofty mountain forest, Muir exults in the scene with the words, "The setting sun filled them with amber light, and seemed to say, while they listened, 'My peace I give unto you'" (Ibid., p. 257, John 14:27). Pretty radical lines for one who knew their Bible so well--to quote the Sun speaking words of the Galilean rabbi. Yet this was the same man who urged children to "walk with Nature" and learn that "All is divine harmony" (*A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf*, pp. 70-71), who countered the orthodox "expositors of God's intentions" with the argument that "It never seems to occur to these far-seeing teachers that Nature's object in making animals and plants might possibly be first of all the happiness of each one of them" (Ibid., pp. 138-139). In this same presentation on his long stroll through the American South he refers to the "Creator" who has made everything in the cosmos of the same material (not a typical Christian explication of the Genesis God). He ends his "heretical" train of thought with glee: "Glad to leave these ecclesiastical fires and blunders, I joyfully return to the immortal truth and immortal beauty of Nature" (Ibid., p. 142).

Some have drawn conclusions about Muir's religious sentiments from passages such as his letter to Jeanne Carr in January of 1866 in which he speaks of the "page of Nature" harmonizing in some sense with the Bible. While he is writing to his obviously more "religious" friend and confidant, Muir also makes a clear confession: "that I take more intense delight from reading the power and *goodness* (his italics) of God from 'the things which are made' than from the Bible" (*Gisel, Kindred and Related Spirits*, pp. 34-35). It is scarcely more than a summary of Muir's life to say that he heard sermons in stone, choirs in the waterfalls, read the bible of the mountains and felt full of the sacred in the great temple of Nature. This line from *Steep Trails* only undergirds my point: "How wholly infused with God is this one big word of love that we call the world!" (p. 17). The most neglected of Christian scriptures echo their chorus: "God is Love" (First Letter of John 4:16).

As for John's fundamental departure from the church of his youth he wrote to his brother David on March 20, 1870, "I am sitting here in a little shanty made of sugar pine shingles this Sabbath evening. I have not been at church a single time since leaving home. Yet this glorious valley might well be called a church, for every lover of the great Creator who comes. . .fails not to worship as he never did before" (*The Life and Letters of John Muir*, pp. 112-113). Muir's wide-open sense of church leads me to conclude that his *natural spirituality* (a concept I further explore in my writings and on my website at www.naturetemple.net) grew beyond the parochial Christian God to a more Universal Creator or Creative Energy acknowledged by Wiccans, Pagans and mystics of many of the major religious traditions of the planet. It might not be far off the mark to rephrase his words from the close of *My Boyhood and Youth* and say that Muir left "the Christian

Sanctuary for the Sanctuary of the Wilderness." I would go so far as to say that it is fairly clear from the corpus of his literary work that John Muir can never be claimed by the Christian community, except to say that he sauntered out the door and never returned (I did this myself, following a service in the Muir family kirk in his hometown of Dunbar, Scotland). This is most welcomed by those of us who seek to live and work as companions with Nature and Spirit in a diverse, pluralistic world in great need of open-hearted, open-minded voices.

Near the end of his life Muir wrote to a progressive political reformer,

"The lesson of your life all should read, for in it there are some of the finest and divinest things humanity has to show" (Branch, *John Muir's Last Journey*, p. 221). The same is true, I think, with the adventurous life of the natural pagan from Scotland.

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