

“The Bible of Nature: A Scripture for Seculars”

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“Miles and miles of tree scripture along the sky, a bible that will one day be read! The beauty of its letters and sentences have burned me like fire through all these Sierra seasons.”

~John Muir, Letter to Jeanne Carr (September, 1874)

Those of us who have chosen to wander “off trail” to find or make our own paths in non-supernatural wilds, sometimes wonder if there are any maps left for the adventure forward. When we’re not busy sketching our own maps, we may stop to realize we are *living* in the great map. . .and, there are no maps.

In *Nature’s God*, Matthew Stewart tells us the only book in the (Connecticut) village where Revolutionary War hero Ethan Allen grew up, was the Bible. That certainly wasn’t unusual in rural settlements in the New World or Old. Naturalist John Muir, as a young boy, had to sneak books to read by candlelight in the family’s farmhouse basement in Wisconsin because his self-styled Scottish preacher father was a Bible-only believer. Muir’s freethinking (like his free-climbing in the mountains) caused him to leave the Bible far back on the trail. He had it memorized anyway, as his Alaska missionary friend, Samuel Hall Young, wrote in 1915: “I had my printed Bible with me, and he had his in his head--the result of a Scotch father’s discipline” (*Alaska Days with John Muir*).

For Ethan Allen, as for Muir, there was one Good Book in their brain, but the “Bible of Nature” became a much more alive and accessible text for ethical, spiritual guidance as well as philosophical and scientific knowledge, and even political action. This unbound book was not only wide open and fascinating but actually taught itself, if a student was paying attention. As Allen--author of his own “bible,” *Oracles of Reason* (1784)--put it, anyone with sense can learn everything worth knowing from “the air we breathe in, the light of the sun, the waters of the murmuring hills,” in the “rainy and fair seasons, monsoons and refreshing breezes, feed time and harvest, day and night” (Stewart, p. 47). A bit later, the seeds of this new natural gospel were harvested in Thomas Paine’s dual revolutions in government and religion, throwing out the old and planting the new.

Entering the Alaskan frontier, Muir was amused when the missionaries he was sailing with forgot their missions and bibles as the magnificent mountain ranges came into view. “The earnest, childish wonderment with which this glorious page of Nature’s Bible was contemplated was delightful to see” (*Travels in Alaska*, 1915). The young naturalist couldn’t wait to leap into his “mountains of God.” But what did Muir mean by this “God”? In a journal entry scribbled down in June 1875, he wrote this piece of heresy: “No synonym for God is so perfect as Beauty. . . . All is Beauty!”

Muir’s friend, John Burroughs, developed these infidel insights in an essay called “The Gospel of Nature” (see *Time and Change*, 1912). Burroughs, like Muir, was raised in a religious family and once considered the ministry. The heretic spirit was too strong in him though and **something greater than God was calling him**. “Except ye become in a measure as little children, ye cannot enter the kingdom of Nature.” As Burroughs let go of the old religion, a new and improved version, a new translation, was appearing.

“The forms and creeds of religion change, but the sentiment of religion--the wonder and reverence and love we feel in the presence of the inscrutable universe--persists.” He knew the language of faith well, and completely reshaped it for our age.

Each of these naturalistic thinkers was like a schoolchild hearing the bell and running out the doors to a much more interesting and exciting School that welcomed their delightful curiosity. Muir’s famous line when he left the University of Wisconsin echoes this anticipation: “I was only leaving one University for another. . .the University of the Wilderness” (*My Boyhood and Youth*, 1912). And, he was leaving one Church for another; one Bible for another; one worldview for another. What a liberating feeling! What a sense of graduation!

Could it be that this new, wild Bible--this scripture spread out over the untamed landscapes--is no bible or scripture at all? Could it be that this “holy book,” with no origin outside our universe, is such an amazing, living record of our wildness in this wilderness of space that everything is holy and nothing at all is “holy”?

The incredible beauty of the world and the cosmos makes super-natural faith fade like the fog in the sun. The grass withers, the flower fades, faith dies, but the word of Nature lives on.

If there is a relevant “ministry” and a “calling” left to hear, left to teach if not to preach, maybe it’s quite literally in the “call of the wild,” the Gospel of Beauty heralded by our Nature Prophets who forever point us toward what Emerson identified as “the most ancient religion.”

After a walk through a redwood forest today, I stood quietly by a late summer stream. It was a gentle reminder that all those years in the Church, all the years of biblical study and ministry, all the books and “spiritual lessons” taught me no more than this day in the woods. This is the only scripture I need. The only good news to teach and never preach. The only “spirituality” that remains. All is Beauty; all is secular. This is the Greatest Bible there is, with letters and sentences that burn like fire, wherever the paths may lead.

Chris Highland is a former Presbyterian Minister and Interfaith Chaplain. He is the author of ten books including “Meditations of John Muir,” “My Address is a River” and “Life After Faith.” He blogs as Secular Chaplain (www.secularchaplain.wordpress.com). He teaches a course for theists and nontheists titled, “A Wild Spirituality of Nature: On the Trail of Muir and Burroughs” at the College of Marin in the SF Bay Area. Chris is currently the Manager of a nonprofit housing cooperative and his wife Carol is a Minister and the Director of an Interfaith Council. His main site is www.chighland.com.