

Religion & Excursion: Origin of John Muir's Ecological Consciousness

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Abstract

John Muir is a well-known Scottish-born American naturalist, explorer, and author who has published a series of essays and letters. Muir is widely well-known for his ecological consciousness. This paper explores the origin of Muir's ecological thinking. It concludes that religious belief and excursions are two major factors contributing to the origin of Muir's ecological consciousness.

Keywords

Ecological Consciousness; Religious Belief; Excursions.

1. Introduction

Everything has its origin. Of course, the formation of Muir's ecological consciousness is no exception. In this paper, the author attempts to make an in-depth analysis of the main factors contributing to the formation of Muir's ecological consciousness. Through the study of his letters, periodicals and published works, as well as the consideration of the historical and cultural context, the formation of Muir's ecological consciousness will be reconstructed into two parts: Muir's religious belief, and his personal travels experience. In the first part, this paper discusses Muir's ecological consciousness and integrates the religious resources he can obtain. The second part expounds on Muir's excursions, which is very helpful to the formation of his ecological consciousness.

1.1. Muir's Religious Belief

According to The Holy Bible, God created humankind that "have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and overall the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth" (Genesis: 26). As a result, it is noteworthy that Christianity seems to be the most human-centered religion in the world. It establishes a duality between man and nature. It firmly believes that human beings should use nature to achieve their goals, which is God's will. "The Christian world had been dominated by the dogmas built upon classical Greek philosophy which posited the moral superiority of humans over animals." (Ronald H. Limburg, 1991: 32). For most of Western history, animals have no status in later generations and therefore have no morality. (Ibid.: 33).

Muir grew up in an immigrant family with a strong religious background. In his family, Muir's father, Daniel Muir, was an avid Christian, and he "attended almost all types of church meetings, especially revival meetings" (1913:88). As Holmes said, as a lifelong religious seeker, Daniel Muir believed that it was his responsibility to "instill the word of God in the wider society and in the circle of his family" (Holmes: 4). Therefore, Daniel Muir has been letting his children study the Bible every day.

Daniel Muir was also very strict with children in daily life. Daniel Muir believed that it takes sweat and hard work for a person to go to heaven. Therefore, Muir and his siblings took on most of the work on the farm. Muir described him as not allowed to take a short break because summer work was very heavy. They spend 16 to 17 hours a day doing hard work. Muir has been plowing since he was 12 years old, when he was only a little bit higher on the plow handle.

Obviously, this kind of work is too hard for such a young child. The heavy work on the farm hindered Muir's growth. Therefore, he is called the dwarf of the family.

Daniel Muir is a very hardworking and serious person, and he treats his children the same way. He believed that God and hard work are by far the best doctor. Once, Muir got mumps, and he couldn't eat anything except milk. Even so, Muir still had to work hard. With only one exception, Muir was allowed to leave the field being harvested when he had pneumonia. Muir stayed in bed for several weeks, until he got through it on his own.

As a devout Christian, Daniel Muir believed that land was created for people to make the most of it. For example, when referring to Indians' legal ownership of land, Daniel Muir believed that if an Indian's family needs thousands of acres of land, then this land will be more valuable in the hands of diligent and God-fearing farmers. At the same time, it can support more people and help spread the gospel. Daniel Muir's view is consistent with the popular view in the 19th century in the United States that only those who make full use of the land and can improve it have the right to own land. John Muir observed that farmers are sparing no effort to get rich at the expense of nature. From the perspective of these farmers, the land is a natural resource for human use or even development. Muir's attitude towards land use is different from his father's, he opposes excessive land reclamation. However, his father's religious beliefs had a great influence on Muir. Brian Patrick Anthony believes that Muir does not take God and religion as seriously as his father. On the contrary, he found God in nature and formed his own Christian faith (2002: 76).

As Cheng Hong pointed out, "Maybe it is because there is a father-like stern god in the family that Muir turned to nature to seek a motherly god" (2013: 157). Unlike his father's Calvinism, Muir believed that God is a benevolent person who exists in nature and is easily approachable. Muir regards nature as a special place where one can directly experience God. In *The Idea of Wilderness* (1991), contemporary deep ecologist Max Oelschlaeger believed that Muir was a biocentric pantheism.

1.2. Muir's Excursions

Muir's travels mean a lot to him, which exerts great influence on his ecological consciousness. On a summer vacation, Muir has some wanderings from Wisconsin to Mississippi and to St. Anthony Falls, making Muir realize he wants to study geology and botany in real surroundings. As Donald Worster suggests, "One definition of a tourist is a person traveling for pleasure. That would cover every excursion Muir made throughout his life" (2008: 377). Given that Muir's travels, each area he visited has meaning for him. In light of his eye accident in 1867, Muir himself argues that his right eye is gone, closed forever on all God's beauty. The next month after the accident, fortunately, Muir's sight is restored. Therefore, he decides to study the beauty of creation rather than the contrivances of man. Therefore, Muir had a thousand-mile walk to Mexico, and spent a great deal of time in the mountains of Nevada, making him seek God in nature.

It is on September 10-12, 1867 that Muir encounters mountains for the first time. John Muir's journey from New York City to California of March, 1868, would be the journey that brought Muir to his most beloved country, the high Sierras, and to his ultimate home on the United States' West Coast. In his thousand-mile walk, Muir was seeking for the wildest, leafiest, and the least trodden way he could find. After his thousand-mile walk, however, Muir had malaria. Therefore, he couldn't be able to finish his goal of visiting the south of America during his younger years.

Muir's main goal in life was to see, learn, and appreciate all of Nature's creations, including non-human animals until his dying day. Since God allowed him to regain his vision after the accident in 1867, he spent the rest of his time seeing the truth and beauty inherent in the world. It is evident that Muir's travels have the purpose, of seeking the pleasures one finds in the cathedrals of God. As a young boy, Muir was influenced by the decorative and descriptive writings of

Alexander von Humboldt and Mungo Park. Their colorful stories of trips through South America and Africa respectively ignited Muir's creative imagination and took him to places he had only envisioned.

By traveling as much as possible, and by soliciting observations from other travelers, Muir develops his own ecological thinking, reconsidering the relationship between man and non-human species from a more biocentric viewpoint.

2. Conclusion

This paper takes the social and cultural background of Muir's era into consideration, attempting to make an overall grasp of the origin of Muir's ecological consciousness. According to the above-mentioned analysis, a conclusion could be drawn that Muir develops his own ecological thinking based on his religious belief and excursions, asserting that humankind and other species are in an equal line in the physical world. In other words, religion and excursion are the two main factors contributing to the formation of Muir's ecological consciousness.

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