

## One God, One Nature: An Environmental History of the Stone-Campbell Movement

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The great Scottish-American environmentalist John Muir, known for his profound, spiritual writings on the American landscape, the establishment of the Sierra Club, and his advocacy for preservation of America's wilderness, was in his youth affiliated with the Disciples of Christ, something not often discussed among modern day Disciples or their sister denomination, the Churches of Christ.

Muir's father, Daniel, long a religious dissident in his hometown of Dunbar, was attracted to the teachings of Alexander Campbell when the latter returned to Scotland in the 1840s. Preaching the rejection of hierarchies and unity of Christians, Campbell's words appealed to Daniel looking for answers he could not find elsewhere.

John Muir's relationship with the Stone-Campbell Movement is one that is recognized but often not explored as it could be. In all fairness, there is little to explore. While John did not ever revoke his affiliation with the Disciples, and often received the Disciples' literature and almost certainly read Campbell's *Millennial Harbinger*, he rarely attended any religious services and clearly struggled to reconcile his harsh upbringing with his religious life.<sup>1</sup>

This paper is not to convince one of Muir's relevance as a Stone-Campbell figure; that is an association that has been excellently discussed elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> But rather, here I seek to

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<sup>1</sup> Muir's early life has been explored in many texts, but especially Donald Worster's *A Passion for Nature: The Life of John Muir* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) and Stephen Holmes' *Young John Muir: An Environmental Biography* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999). Mark Stoll has written about Muir's religious life in "God and John Muir: A Psychological Interpretation of John Muir's Life and Religion," *Sierra Club*, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey Bilbro in *Loving God's Wildness* (Tuscaloosa, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 2015) and John Pierce's "Christianity and 'Mountainanity': The Restoration Movement's Influence on John Muir," (*Religion and the Arts* 17 vol. 1-2, 2015, 114-134), both elegantly discuss Muir's relationship to the Stone Campbell Movement.

understand whether the Stone-Campbell Movement has an environmental ethic. Does the Stone-Campbell Movement, from its roots, comment on or intersect with the development of America's deep love of, and conflict with, nature?

To begin with, an environmental ethic as defined here does not simply identify one's relationship to nature. "Environment" is a complex word, often meaning nature but also one's surroundings, human or otherwise. Attitudes toward the natural world and ecology is a component of environmental thought, in addition to ideologies of science. Campbell commented only occasionally on nature, but commented frequently on science, which gives an idea of how he conceptualized the physical world. This theme clearly runs throughout the tradition: after Campbell come other figures with environmental concerns such as David Lipscomb in the Churches of Christ and Robert Richardson in the Disciples.<sup>3</sup> Both were active in the discussions of the modernist debates of the early twentieth century, which defined the trajectory of the Disciples' relationship to land. Eschatology is another component of environmental thought: Campbell, preoccupied with the millennium, had a clear vision of what a "new heavens, new earth" looked like. Clearly this is part of an environmental vision: how the earth ought to look, not just in the divine sense, but in a literal, physical sense as well.

What does an environmental history of the Stone-Campbell Movement look like? Such a history has many interlocutors, beginning with Campbell himself. While Campbell died shortly before the modern environmental movement emerged, there are components of an environmental ethic in his theology. The theologies of later Stone-Campbell leaders, though not the primary focus of this piece, also reflected attitudes toward nature. Campbell was a man fascinated by the world around him. Nature, to him, fulfilled the edicts of God; everything served a purpose. The Bible, too, possessed qualities of nature: it served not only as a force for spiritual direction in the

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<sup>3</sup> Duane D. Cummins, *The Disciples: A Struggle for Reformation* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2009), 121-122.

world, but the very essence of the Bible possessed a quality that ordered the physical world. The Bible functioned as a physical mechanism in the cosmos.

Much of the 1980s and '90s found Stone-Campbell studies discussing the Campbellite philosophy on the visions of “primordium.” Such a concept would not be new in environmental studies either. Carolyn Merchant’s seminal 2003 book *Reinventing Eden* has centered much of the narrative of enviro-religious studies on the compulsion to “reinvent Eden” or to remake a society that emulated the one in the Garden of Eden. Campbell and his followers ran with this, but a twist: instead of reinventing Eden, they hoped to reinstate the New Testament Church. But in Campbell’s mind, the New Testament Church existed outside of time. Such an attitude of time and nature is crucial to the Stone-Campbell Movement’s environmental legacy.<sup>4</sup>

In the early nineteenth century, it was common to view the new American nation as a blank slate, a place of opportunity and new beginnings. As Richard T. Hughes and C. Leonard Allen have suggested, “that millennial visions are implicit in this understanding is obvious.” They continue: “generally implicit in the rhetoric of American newness and millennialism was the fundamental theme of recovery – recovery of something primal, ancient, old . . . they were concerned to recover the primordial past that stood behind the historical past . . . understood in this way, millennialism was itself a kind of recovery of sacred time.”<sup>5</sup> Hughes and Allen suggest that many movements in early America were influenced by the rhetoric of restoration. Beginning with the Puritans, the American continent presented something in the Western imagination—an opportunity for renewal, redemption, and creation of a divinely blessed society.

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<sup>4</sup> Carolyn Merchant, *Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Richard T. Hughes and C. Leonard Allen, *Illusions of Innocence: Protestant Primitivism in America, 1630-1875* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 1-2. By “sacred time,” Hughes and Allen mean the recovery of the time of “the Gods,” which came with a specific dispensational understanding of a first age that would be recovered.

Millennial visions of time are crucial to an environmental vision of the Stone-Campbell Movement. The hope of a restored order influenced all of creation. How and when millennial aspirations took place would be critical to this environmental vision.

An idealization of nature frequently went hand-in-hand with apocalyptic visions. Furthermore, the scientific revolution set the stage for the apocalyptic visions of both the Anglicans in England and the American Puritans, major predecessors to the Stone-Campbell Movement in the United States. Sir Francis Bacon, for example, was a devout Anglican whose philosophical works helped develop a system of deductive reasoning. Bacon, too, believed that science and reason would lead to a utopian society, a “great instauration” of original harmony.<sup>6</sup>

Campbell was fiercely anti-clerical, and also spoke against using creeds. His determination to abandon past tradition earned him a heap of scorn from mainstream religious leaders, some labeling him as Satan or the deceiver whose presence would precede the millennium.<sup>7</sup> Admittedly, Campbell had more than his share of contradictions. He spoke against the clergy and in praise of the laity, while having been ecclesiastically and theologically trained himself. He praised the wisdom of the people, and yet cautioned against the “uncharacted ignoramuses who constitute the majority.”<sup>8</sup> He argued against revealed religion, and led his movement, as his opponents decried, into “rationalism.” His views were built upon the assumption that many Christian superstitions were unwarranted, and defended the natural rights of man—freedom of speech, conscience, and private property, in particular.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Mark Stoll, *Protestantism, Capitalism, and Nature in America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997), 69-75.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Frederick West, *Alexander Campbell and Natural Theology*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948), 45.

<sup>8</sup> Campbell, *Christian Baptist* IV, 10; West, *Alexander Campbell and Natural Theology*, 49.

<sup>9</sup> West, *Alexander Campbell and Natural Theology*, 52.

While many features of Campbell's belief system aligned well with natural theology, he tended to distance himself from this line of thinking.<sup>10</sup> Natural theology is generally understood as truth not revealed through Scripture. Campbell is highly critical of the idea one can understand nature without God's word. Nonetheless, Campbell believed in revealed truth, insofar that he believed revealed truth must also be revealed in the Bible; however, he also believed that the Bible and the book of nature were always in harmony, not an uncommon understanding of his time. There was no need to distinguish between the two. With this in mind, an environmental ethic can be pieced together by observing a few key elements.

Primarily, Campbell's education in the Common Sense school and his heavy reliance on John Locke's philosophy provide insight into his natural theology. His continued fascination with the scientific world demonstrated his sense of the wonders of creation. He possessed an Enlightenment-era sympathy toward the sciences which show this reliance on nature more clearly. Finally, his postmillennial writings—along with his fascination in science—demonstrated his belief that the physical world would be reconstructed to equip God's Kingdom and to restore an ancient, holy order. In his tract, *The Christian System*, Campbell posited, "If nature be a system, religion is no less so. God is 'a God of order,' and that is the same as to say he is a God of system. Nature and religion, the offspring of the same supreme intelligence, bear the image of one father; twin sisters of the same Divine parentage. There is an intellectual and a moral universe as clearly bounded as the system of material nature."<sup>11</sup> Campbell directly identifies the Bible as a means of interpreting the ordered universe. The Bible, he goes on, is a means of determining the spheres that govern each of these systems, the systems that Man finds himself in.

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<sup>10</sup> Again, Campbell was far from consistent in his approach to theology. This is, in part, due to his lengthy half-century career. However, the hopes of unity in Christ across denominations was noble yet unrealistic, considering Campbell also hoped all Christians would unify around his principles.

<sup>11</sup> Campbell, "The Christian System," 29.

As he says, “The Bible is to the intellectual and moral world of man, what the sun is to the planets in our system;—the fountain and source of light and life, spiritual and eternal.”<sup>12</sup>

Campbell continued to dress his theological beliefs in the language of the natural world. In an early volume of the *Millennial Harbinger*, Campbell wrote, “When we are taught to read the volume of Nature, or rather the great library of God, and have made some proficiency in the volume of Revelation, we discover that there is an admirable analogy between the volumes of Creation and Redemption.”<sup>13</sup> Campbell began to lay out his vision for the *Millennial Harbinger* coated in the language of creation. The ages of history he tied to physical events. Rome, he said, was living under an eclipse. “The Sun of Mercy,” he wrote, “has arisen” on the present time. Campbell’s tendency to create biblical analogies in natural terms continued throughout his career.

Despite his coordinated public attacks on natural theology, Campbell was deeply influenced by contemporary romantic views of nature. As a young man, Campbell marveled at nature. Like his idol Jonathan Edwards, he too took long walks in the woods to discern his place in the world and to reflect on God’s promise. The fact that, by the time he was sixteen, he had not felt God’s revelation to him—which would have ensured his status as one of the elect—deeply disturbed Alexander and his father. This ultimately turned him toward John Locke’s philosophies of reason revealing God’s truth.<sup>14</sup> Regardless, Campbell remained enamored with the natural world.

Additionally, he frequently connected his theological ideas with scientific phenomena. He related the concept of light at creation with electricity. He explained that “light, associated with

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<sup>12</sup> Campbell, “The Christian System,” 29.

<sup>13</sup> *Millennial Harbinger*, vol. 1, January 4, 1830.

<sup>14</sup> Eva Jean Wrather, *Alexander Campbell: Adventurer in Freedom: A Literary Biography, Volume 1* (Fort Worth, Tex.: The Disciples of Christ Historical Society, 2005), 42-43. Stone similarly experienced divine revelation in the woods, as he details in his autobiography.

heat . . . is the vital principle of animated nature. After light [came] the ethereal, as essential of the various creations, as well as to life, probably itself the effect of the electric principle associated with light.”<sup>15</sup> Before widespread industrialization in the latter half of the nineteenth century, electricity was widely considered in the popular imagination as awe-inspiring and dangerous; one can sense the metaphor for which Campbell is aiming. By the end of the nineteenth century, interestingly, electricity had developed as a symbol of a progressive, Utopian vision of society—for one thing, it removed the dangers of fire and smoke from people’s daily lives.<sup>16</sup> Campbell was not unique amongst frontier revivalists for connecting electricity with the creation or God’s properties.<sup>17</sup> Regardless, he advocated for a world where the miraculous went hand-in-hand with scientific principles.

Campbell often used natural metaphors to support his vision of both simple, Bible-based instruction and of a harmonious world in which nature and spirituality worked in tandem. In his writings of 1843, called “the Ordinances,” Campbell used the expression of “ordinances” to define God’s ability to communicate this grace personified through nature. He employed physical science as a metaphor, in part, to support his vision that the Bible was the unifying force of “spiritual life and health.”<sup>18</sup> Campbell deliberately wielded science as a metaphor to outline a scientific vision of his own, with nature pointing toward divine revelation. Essentially, Campbell argued that God imbued the universe with certain natural properties, or “ordinances”; the world functioned on the basis of those properties in conjunction with each other. The Bible similarly revealed how God’s kingdom works hand-in-hand with these ordinances to create a flourishing

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<sup>15</sup> Alexander Campbell, “Family Culture: Conversations at the Carlton House,” *Christian Messenger and Family Magazine* 1, no. 1 (May 1845), 15.

<sup>16</sup> Daniel French, *When They Hid the Fire: A History of Electricity and Invisible Energy in America* (Pittsburgh, Penn.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016), 21-23.

<sup>17</sup> Brett M. Grainger, *Church in the Wild: Evangelicals in Antebellum America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2019), 175.

<sup>18</sup> Campbell, “The Ordinances,” 320.

natural world that contains a flourishing peaceful society. Nature is God's footstool, to be sure, but it is also crucial that Campbell used it as an example at all: Campbell demonstrated his willingness to use natural metaphors. The functioning of a society rests on both the ordinances of God and Nature operating in tandem. He writes, "In defining a law or ordinance of Nature, our masters of physical science say, 'It is the mode in which the powers of nature act.' In religion, I only amend its verbiage, while I retain its spirit. We say, a law or ordinance of religion is THE MODE IN WHICH THE GRACE OF GOD ACTS UPON HUMAN NATURE."<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, Campbell outlined his view that the Bible had a similar effect upon the world. Spiritual ordinances reflect God's divine will and actions within the world, but further, "The ordinances of Christianity are, therefore, the powers of the gospel of the grace of God. Every law of nature is a specific demonstration of Divine power in reference to some effect no other way attainable. So every ordinance of the gospel is a specific demonstration of Divine grace or spiritual power in reference to some effect no other way attainable."<sup>20</sup> To Campbell, the physical universe manifested God's grace and power. The "New Earth" he envisioned was not just God's handiwork and design but the very idea of love and grace personified.

In this article, Campbell suggested that all natural aspects of life have a direct purpose set down by God. Nature is the revealing force of God's providential meaning. Nature is a demonstration of God's power in the world. As an example, Campbell turns to Jeremiah 31, where, he writes, "the sun, the moon, the stars are called ordinances of God; and therefore all the distinct agencies of nature may be so denominated." He goes on to add, "Of these ordinances I shall select a few as a specimen of them all...[t]hese shall be the sun, moon, stars, atmosphere, earth, water, and electricity." While Campbell suggests that there are other ordinances which are

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<sup>19</sup> Campbell, *The Writings of Alexander Campbell*, 320.

<sup>20</sup> Campbell, *The Writings of Alexander Campbell*, 320.



necessary, he cites these as the most important to both his argument and to nature in general, claiming, “I choose these seven as a specimen of the indispensable and peculiar influence which each of them exerts over organized and animated nature...so much so, at least, that no learned or recondite arguments are demanded in proof of their peculiar influence and necessity in the providential economy of the Great Father of all.” Campbell goes on to argue that each of those ordinances are valuable for the maintenance of a natural universe. Each is fundamentally essential to human life, as well as agriculture and maintaining living conditions across the world. These physical manifestations balance out the natural order of the universe. Remove one—such as light from a plant—no matter if the others are present, the plant “will never be fruitful and verdant without it.”<sup>21</sup> He goes on to write, “It would be a more curious than profitable speculation to attempt to explain either the why or the how of all this natural machinery. We have to do with the fact, and not with the theory of that fact. It is God's will, and it is His wisdom, too, and therefore, it is essentially and benevolently so, as all Nature cries aloud through all her works.” Campbell's idea that God's love was an illuminator of nature differed from the older vision that wilderness was a godless place of torment, and that nature could only be enjoyed through the highly cultivated garden. Instead, nature—and everything in it—pointed to God's mercy.

His vision of land still led back to the supremacy of God. “Hence, although there is a unity of design, and a cooperation of God, His Word and SPIRIT – of Father, Son and Holy Ghost, in creation, providence, and redemption; still to each of these almighty agents there is a province never invaded by another,” he writes, suggest to each spiritual category belongs its own domain and balance of the universe. He answers these questions by pointing back to God's word: “The Father becomes not incarnate, suffers, and dies; the spirit becomes not incarnate, suffers

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<sup>21</sup> Campbell, “The Ordinances,” 321-322.

and dies; but the Divine Word does. The son assumes not the office of the Spirit any more than He does not assume the form of a dove, or breathe like the north or south winds upon our souls and our spirits. Nor does the Son send the Father to be the Saviour of the world, and to mediate the reconciliation of man to the Throne and Sovereign of the Universe.”<sup>22</sup> For Campbell, the natural universe mimicked the spiritual one, and the Bible was a crucial resource for understanding what held the spiritual world to its laws and ordinances.

Furthermore, Campbell often discussed the universe as God’s love personified. Creation was the place where God, and his wisdom, existed in order to fulfill his promise. “The universe itself is the offspring of God’s love,” he wrote. “It was not created simply because he had the wisdom or power to do it. The element of love entered into the intention, characterized the execution, and approved the completion of his labors.”<sup>23</sup> Creation, in other words, was formed through God’s goodness. This conviction informed Campbell’s beliefs in a millennial world, which was to be created by God, and admired, since it personified God’s love to humanity. This perspective certainly differs from many other theological thinkers of the time who praised nature itself for revealing divine truth, but did not suggest that the Earth was a place fashioned out of God’s love and not simply for humankind to exploit.

In his final *Millennial Harbinger* in 1865, Campbell once again reiterated his belief in the millennial reign of Christ, and the hope to restore a Millennial Kingdom.<sup>24</sup> The New Heavens, New Earth philosophy was something informed by Christ’s love that he hoped to see fulfilled on earth. This belief meant a significantly higher consideration for the treatment of land and nature

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<sup>22</sup> Campbell, “The Ordinances,” 323.

<sup>23</sup> Alexander Campbell, *Familiar Lectures on the Pentateuch* (rep. Rosemead, Cal.: Old Paths Book Club, 1958), 273.

<sup>24</sup> Campbell retired from *Harbinger* in November 1865 due to declining health. He would die a few months later in March 1866. He turned over the reins of the paper to W.K. Pendleton, his son-in-law, who shut the paper down in 1870.

than many later fundamentalist Christians espoused, who emphasized a premillennial eschatology preaching of doom.

### **The Story Continued**

Campbell's death in 1866 corresponded with major changes in American society. The Civil War had ended, and Darwin's theory of natural selection was gaining influence. George Perkins Marsh's *Man and Nature* argued that human actions altered ecological landscapes. The American environmental movement was in its infancy. James A. Garfield, Disciples of Christ minister, while a Congressman from Ohio, supported early conservation efforts in Yellowstone and elsewhere. However, Garfield offers a mixed legacy, as he also advocated for extermination of the buffalo on the Great Plains, an ecological disaster that also symbolized Native American removal.<sup>25</sup>

Others, like David Lipscomb from the Churches of Christ and Robert Richardson in the Disciples, engaged in their own speculations on theories of Darwin and their correspondence with nature. Splits between the Disciples, Christian Churches, and Churches of Christ create their own variations to a nature ethic, with the Disciples adopting a resolution at the 1971 General Assembly to explore further ecological stewardship and that the "the Christian Church and its members renew their covenant of responsible stewardship toward the Earth."<sup>26</sup>

And, naturally, John Muir became the most famous advocate for America's wild spaces at the turn of the twentieth century. Muir advocated for the establishment of national parks and fought against the Hetch Hetchy Dam in San Francisco. His voluminous, proto-religious writings on nature have drawn significant scholarly attention in the field of religion and environmental

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<sup>25</sup> Congressional Record, 43rd Congress, 1st session, p. 2107.

<sup>26</sup> Disciples of Christ Resolution no. 38,

<https://www.discipleshomemissions.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/ENV7338.pdf>.

studies. Other scholars have analyzed Muir's heritage with the Stone-Campbell tradition, and shall not be my focus here. But Muir's looming influence in America's environmental consciousness merits further attention to the Stone-Campbell Movement's relationship to nature at-large.

As we have seen, Campbell himself had a complex relationship to nature. He frequently used nature and science as metaphors in his writings, drawing on the spirit of a romantic age. He saw the Bible as a physical force in the universe. His view of millenarianism contained the hope of a renewed Earth – and a renewed nature.

Alexander Campbell, and his contemporaries in the movement, articulated a clear vision of nature. It could be said that Campbell planted the seed for understanding God's place and nature for the movement, developing an ethic that adapts with each generation. Inheritors of the movement decorated such natural beliefs with their interpretations, but emerged from Campbell's lofty shadow. The future of Stone-Campbell studies and environmental studies has far to go to articulate this vision of nature throughout the movement and its effects on the modern world. As memberships decline in Stone-Campbell churches in the modern world, with younger populations increasingly concerned with environmental matters, it would behoove us to give this ethic much more attention.

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