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John Muir and Pilgrimage through Sacred Land

MICHAEL KUNZ

The small city of Santiago de Compostela lies in the wet, green, hilly and remote northwest corner of Spain. It lacks the climate and culture of other major Spanish tourist destinations, but it has a unique history. Along with Jerusalem and Rome, Santiago was one of the great medieval pilgrimage destinations. By tradition, Santiago's sanctity resided in the remains of the apostle James, the brother of John, which are reputedly buried in Santiago's great Gothic cathedral. A network of routes funneled west across Europe to converge on Santiago during the Middle Ages, where penitent pilgrims could receive indulgences. Pilgrims today who walk a minimum of 100 kilometers (or bicycle 200) still receive a traditional document from the local Roman Catholic diocese. In 2015, the church issued 262,000 such certificates. Every single year for the past thirty years (excepting holy years, which spike even higher), the number of pilgrims arriving at Santiago has increased.¹ Traditional spiritual practices have an allure for many moderns seeking a deeper experience of life or direction toward a deeper sense of purpose.

The two essential elements of pilgrimage – the journey and the sacred – make it a powerful metaphor for the life of faith. Like all compelling symbols, it can be motivation for great good; it can also be justification for great harm. Where we locate the sacred aspect of pilgrimage is significant. Pilgrimage that is a journey toward a sacred destination evokes one set of attitudes; pilgrimage as a journey through sacred space entails a different set. These two approaches to the life of faith have implications for our ethical actions, our relationship to nature, and the relevance of religious faith in the modern world. A century ago, John Muir, the great peripatetic prophet of the American conservation movement, used the language of pilgrimage and sacred spaces to great effect in his efforts to awaken a nation to the value of nature. Muir's nature writings demonstrate an enduring popularity and relevance and his language of pilgrimage is deserving of reflection.

Muir's Vision of Nature as Sacred Space

John Muir was raised by a strict and religious father who forced his memorization of most of the bible.² Though his father's particular religious emphases held little attraction for the adult Muir, his upbringing had significant effects on his perspectives on God's immanence in nature, his sense of missionary zeal, and his religious rhetoric.³

Muir's journeys through nature were the foundation of his environmental advocacy. He began his perigrinations early. While the Civil War raged, Muir the college student left his home in Wisconsin and forayed extensively into the Canadian forest wilderness above Lake Superior. His next great journey was a perilous thousand-mile walk through the post-Civil War South to arrive at the Gulf of Mexico. After recovering from near-fatal malarial illness, he eventually set sail for California, where he promptly walked south and east to the Sierra Nevada. In the following spring of 1869, Muir entered the Sierra Nevada employed as a shepherd, following the greening of vegetation upslope as seasons progressed.

Muir described mountain travel as pilgrimage through sacred space. Late in life, when participating in Sierra Club outings, he would arrive at camp last out of all the company. A friend quoted Muir's explanation:

People ought to saunter in the mountains - not hike! Do you know the origin of that word 'saunter?' It's a beautiful word. Away back in the Middle Ages people used to go on pilgrimages to the Holy Land, and when people in the villages through which they passed asked where they were going, they would reply, "A la sainte terre," 'To the Holy Land.' And so they became known as sainte-terre-ers or saunterers. Now these mountains are our Holy Land, and we ought to saunter through them reverently, not 'hike' through them.⁴

Muir's impact stemmed from his unique vision of the world through which he sauntered. Though influenced by Romanticism and Transcendentalism to find God in the beauty of nature, his vision was also that of an accomplished naturalist who knew the world through intimate and lengthy experience.⁵ Upon encountering one of the rarest and most beautiful of orchids, the *Calypso borealis*, during his Canadian journey, he extolled: "I never before saw a plant so

full of life; so perfectly spiritual, it seemed pure enough for the throne of its Creator.”⁶

His decision to repent of the sedentary life was prompted by an accident that jeopardized his physical vision. Muir had been a skilled inventor and mechanic who earned a comfortable living improving the efficiency of factory production in Indiana. A factory injury blinded him in one eye and sympathetic blindness led to loss of sight in the other. Both eyes were eventually restored, but not before weeks of sightless recuperation led him to reconsider his deepest calling in life. He reflected, “I could gladly have died on the spot, because I did not feel that I could have the heart to look at any flower again.”⁷ His close lifelong confidant, Jeanne Carr, encouraged him to exercise his unique vision: “I have often wondered what God was training you for. He gave you the eye within the eye, to see all natural objects the realized ideas of His mind” and, when vision in one eye was in question, “you will see more with one visual organ than most persons could with half a dozen.”⁸ Upon recovery, he abandoned the settled life and commenced his journey to the gulf, and finally to California.

At each location during his shepherding summer in the Sierra, Muir’s perception of nature was one imbued with the presence of the sacred. Upon encountering a pool by a cascade near his sheep camp he writes:

[I]t seemed the most romantic spot I had yet found, --the one big stone with its mossy level top and smooth sides standing square and firm and solitary, like an altar, the fall in front of it bathing it lightly with the finest of the spray, just enough to keep its moss cover fresh; the clear green pool beneath, with its foam-bells and its half circle of lilies leaning forward like a band of admirers, and flowering dogwood and alder trees leaning over all in sun-sifted arches. How soothingly, restfully cool it is beneath that leafy, translucent ceiling, and how delightful the water music--the deep bass tones of the fall, the clashing, ringing spray, and infinite variety of small low tones of the current gliding past the side of the boulder-island, and glinting against a thousand smaller stones down the ferny channel!...The place seemed holy, where one might hope to see God. ⁹

A repeated theme in his recounting of his first Sierran summer is the contrast of his own vision of nature with those of others he met along the way. Muir’s flock shared one common route to Yosemite Valley. He encountered tourists bound for the already-famous destination and noted their lack of reverent ap-

preciation for the beauties already surrounding them on the journey: “Somehow most of these travelers seem to care but little for the glorious objects about them, though enough to spend time and money and endure long rides to see the famous valley.” Yet he harbors hope for them: “And when they are fairly within the mighty walls of the temple and hear the psalms of the falls, they will forget themselves and become devout. Blessed, indeed, should be every pilgrim in these holy mountains!”¹⁰

The exemplar of blindness to the sacredness of their surroundings is Muir’s coworker Billy the shepherd.

I have been trying to get him to walk to the brink of Yosemite for a view, offering to watch the sheep for a day, while he should enjoy what tourists come from all over the world to see. But though within a mile of the famous valley, he will not go to it even out of mere curiosity. “What,” says he, “is Yosemite but a canon – a lot of rocks – a hole in the ground – a place dangerous about falling into – a d--d good place to keep away from.” “But think of the waterfalls, Billy – just think of that big stream we crossed the other day, falling half a mile through the air – think of that, and the sound it makes. You can hear it now like the roar of the sea.” Thus I pressed Yosemite upon him like a missionary offering the gospel, but he would have none of it. “I should be afraid to look over so high a wall,” he said. “It would make my head swim. There is nothing worth seeing anyway, only rocks, and I see plenty of them here. Tourists that spend their money to see rocks and falls are fools, that’s all. You can’t humbug me. I’ve been in this country too long for that.” Such souls, I suppose, are asleep, or smothered and befogged beneath mean pleasures and cares.¹¹

The need to truly see and hear the preaching of Nature is clear as Muir reflects upon tourists within Yosemite Valley:

It seems strange that visitors to Yosemite should be so little influenced by its novel grandeur, as if their eyes were bandaged and their ears stopped. Most of those I saw yesterday were looking down as if wholly unconscious of anything going on about them, while the sublime rocks were trembling with the tones of the mighty chanting congregation of waters gathered from all the moun-

tains round about, making music that might draw angels out of heaven. Yet respectable-looking, even wise-looking people were fixing bits of worms on bent pieces of wire to catch trout. Sport they called it. Should church-goers try to pass the time fishing in baptismal fonts while dull sermons were being preached, the so-called sport might not be so bad; but to play in the Yosemite temple, seeking pleasure in the pain of fishes struggling for their lives, while God himself is preaching his sublimest water and stone sermons!

If ancient pilgrimage practice of Jews was to the holy temple of Jerusalem, and medieval Christian pilgrimage was toward sacred cathedrals, Muir saw the truer temples and cathedrals not in what was constructed by human hands, but in what directly revealed the heart of the divine. He writes, “No wonder the hills and groves were God’s first temples, and the more they are cut down and hewn into cathedrals and churches, the farther off and dimmer seems the Lord himself.”¹² From the top of Cathedral Peak in the high country far above Yosemite Valley, Muir proclaimed, “This I may say is the first time I have been at church in California, led here at last, every door graciously opened for the poor lonely worshiper. In our best times everything turns into religion, all the world seems a church and the mountains altars.”¹³ Muir is attentive to the sacred nature of beauty around him. He links nature to the sacred by claiming “No synonym for God is so perfect as Beauty.”¹⁴

MUIR’S PILGRIMAGE THROUGH THE SACRED SEQUOIA GROVES

John Muir’s vision of the sacred in nature is not simply a matter of personal enrichment or spiritual edification. A century later, when environmental problems rose among public concern, cultural historian Lynn White published an influential essay regarding their historical roots. He traced environmental blame to a dominant medieval-western-Christian worldview that divorced the sacred from the natural world, facilitated scientific and technological advances which increased our capacity to impact nature, and justified its exploitation with a religious anthropocentrism which considered human utility the sole purpose of nature.¹⁵ It should be noted that White did not advocate wholesale abandonment of the western religious tradition; however, he did argue that our environmental problems could only be addressed by a fundamental shift in our religious approach and offer the example of Saint Francis of Assisi as an alter-

native. Muir's campaign for the preservation of Giant Sequoia forests stands as a more contemporary witness to the relevance of White's thesis.

The facts that the Giant Sequoias were the planet's largest trees and were of awe-inspiring dimensions did not guarantee their protection. In the North Calaveras Grove, the site of the big trees' rediscovery by Euro-Americans in 1852, the two largest specimens were destroyed not for lumber, but to be exhibited for profit back east and in Europe.¹⁶ Without a sense of the sacredness in nature, an impressively-sized stump is of comparable value to the living tree. The Discovery Tree Stump in Calaveras Grove served as a grand dance floor to visiting tourists following its felling. Even the first voices for Sequoia preservation often framed their argument from a utilitarian and anthropocentric perspective. When Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove of Giant Sequoias were set aside by the federal government as parks to be preserved in 1864, the government made the that their utility as places of human enjoyment outweighed their value in timber.

In late summer of 1875, John Muir left his home in Yosemite Valley and began an extended pilgrimage south through the Sierra Nevada wilderness in search of relatively unexplored groves of Giant Sequoias. The northern groves with which Muir, loggers, and tourists were already very familiar were considered a dwindling relic of a changing world. If these behemoth trees were indeed doomed to inevitable extinction, one could easily justify their harvesting for lumber to serve the higher purpose of human utility.

After a month of fruitless sequoia hunting south of Yosemite, Muir crossed the Kings River (above where is now Pine Flat Reservoir) and climbed four thousand feet in elevation. Soon he encountered a grove of sequoias so vast in Converse Basin that it contained more sequoias than all of the groves north of the Kings River combined—and this was only one of more than a score of medium and large-sized groves he was to encounter as he continued south. At Giant Forest in the Kaweah River drainage, he entered “a magnificent growth of giants grouped in pure temple groves, ranged in colonnades along the sides of meadows, or scattered among the other trees... I wandered on, meeting nobler trees where all are noble, subdued in the general calm, as if in some vast hall pervaded by the deepest sanctities and solemnities that sway human souls.”¹⁷ In his estimation, each grove was more beautiful than the last: “As we advance southward, the trees become more and more impressively exuberant,

tossing their massive crowns against the sky from every ridgetop, and waving onward in graceful compliance to the complicated topography of the basins of the Kaweah and Tule...Here is temple music, the very heart-gladness of the earth going on forever. On the Middle Fork of the Tule I found a sequoia forest eight miles long, six wide..."¹⁸

Muir perceived threats to the continued existence of the groves. Along the way he studied a fire, probably set by shepherds, burning through a sequoia grove. Though he recognized the ability of sequoias to endure fire, his overall assessment considered it to be "the master scourge" of the forests. "The destruction, in great conflagrations, of fine buildings on which loving art has been lavished, sad as it is, seems less deplorable than the burning of these majestic living temples, the grandest of Gothic cathedrals."¹⁹ Flocks of sheep had so overgrazed some terrain that his mule-companion Brownie could find little to eat. "All the basin was swept by swarms of hooped locusts, the southern part over and over again, until not a leaf within reach was left..."²⁰ The greatest threat Muir perceived was that of logging. He noted five mills already active in the vicinity of the groves. While technology and topography limited the ability of loggers to fully exploit the southern sequoia groves in 1875, Muir could clearly see the trajectory of future harvest. The coming of winter forced Muir out of the mountains in November, but not before he had sauntered through the southernmost grove along Deer Creek southeast of Porterville.

Muir emerged from his wilderness pilgrimage as the first scientifically knowledgeable interpreter of the species and as a great voice for wilderness preservation. He spoke consistently of the value of wild beauty and was persuasive in part because his language imbued nature with the sense of the sacred. One immediate product of his explorations was an article published by the *American Association for the Advancement of Science* on the distribution and ecology of sequoias.²¹ The second was an article in the *Sacramento Daily Union* entitled: "God's First Temples: How shall we preserve our forests?"²² His later writings continued to emphasize the perspectives acquired on his sequoia pilgrimage. Twenty five years later, he repeated his prophecies of 1876. To charges that the species was verging on extinction and its preservation unnecessary:

No unfavorable change of climate, so far as I can see, no disease, but only fire and the axe and the ravages of flocks and herds threaten the

existence of these noblest of God's trees. In Nature's keeping they are safe, but through man's agency destruction is making rapid progress, while in the work of protection only a beginning has been made.²³

MUIR AND THE COMPANY OF NON-HUMAN PILGRIMS

An essential aspect of Muir's environmental vision was the lack of anthropocentrism in his relationship to non-human nature.²⁴ In an essay reflecting upon the value of wild sheep whose abode was high in the mountain wilderness, he noted:

No doctrine taught by the present civilization seems to form so insuperable an obstacle in the way of a right understanding of the relations which culture sustains to wildness, as that which declares that the world was made especially for the uses of men. Every animal, plant and crystal controverts it in the plainest terms. Yet it is taught from century to century as something ever new and precious, and in the resulting darkness the enormous conceit is allowed to go unchallenged.²⁵

Pilgrimage may be undertaken solo or in the company of fellow travelers. While many of Muir's longer journeys lacked human companionship, he did not consider himself alone. It is not uncommon to consider animals as companions, and Muir certainly did so, sharing travels with Brownie or his dog Stick-eeen. Muir extended this consideration to the plant world around him, speaking of wildflowers that carpeted his path as "the small plant-people."²⁶ Plants tell stories of natural history. They speak in a language of adaptations that are shaped by environment and familial descent. Like the pilgrims of *Canterbury Tales*, each has its own story to tell: "I drifted about from rock to rock, from stream to stream, from grove to grove. Where night found me, there I camped. When I discovered a new plant, I sat down beside it for a minute or a day, to make its acquaintance and try to hear what it had to say."²⁷

Muir embraced the 19th Century's growing awareness of the depths of space and time through which we travel. He kept a series of journals throughout his life's journeys. On the inside cover of the first, he wrote simply: "John Muir, Earth-planet, Universe." It was the declaration of a pilgrim who recognized no specific earthly address, yet in humility knew that our collective place in the

great scheme of creation was small. He spoke of the broader community of life as fellow companions upon a greater journey that includes humanity. Once, when in the midst of a mountain storm with gale-force winds, he climbed to the top of a swaying conifer tree to experience what the trees experienced. He reflected and concluded:

“We all travel the milky way together, trees and men; but it never occurred to me until this storm-day, while swinging in the wind, that trees are travelers, in the ordinary sense. They make many journeys, not extensive ones, it is true; but our own little journeys, away and back again, are only little more than tree-wavings--many of them not so much.”²⁸

The humility that accompanies this recognition of our human place in deep space and time challenges the anthropocentrism that Lynn White disparaged. This may be why such views engender such discomfort among those whose worldview is shaped by a narrative that only considers the human pilgrimage toward a sacred future. In contrast, Muir took encouragement in the greater story, of which he perceived we were a small part:

And in looking through God’s great stone books made of records reaching back millions and millions of years, it is a great comfort to learn that vast multitudes of creatures, great and small and infinite in number, lived and had a good time in God’s love before man was created²⁹

Even the concept of biological evolution did not discomfit him. He named Darwin among the greater, sympathetic souls of his age, but rejected the cold, competitive worldview that many drew from the theory.³⁰ Muir’s perceived the great kinship of all nature, which was a biological consequence of descent from common ancestry. This dynamic nature of life is in accord with the broader view Muir held, in which all of creation is in constant motion: “Nature is ever at work building and pulling down, creating and destroying, keeping everything whirling and flowing, allowing no rest but in rhythmical motion, chasing everything in endless song out of one beautiful form into another.”³¹ Decades before the term “ecosystem” was used to characterize these cycles and flows within ecological systems, Muir considered movement and change to be the constants of creation’s collective journey.³²

PILGRIMAGE IN THE WAY OF JOHN MUIR

Our own modest journeys may indeed be pilgrimages. The only requisite is the necessary desire to see around us what is of deep value, sacred, or transcendent. In late summer of 2011, I sought to follow the path of John Muir's 1875 sequoia explorations. Like all prophetic voices, Muir's spoke to the critical situation of his specific time, but his words have enduring application to our own. While sequoias are only one particular species with its own unique history and attributes, understanding one story well can give us insight into the larger whole. Encapsulated into each pilgrimage are insights into the larger questions of life and faith, if we have eyes to see and ears to hear.

My pilgrimage along John Muir's way began on the tenth anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. Speeches regarding the need to remember and insure that such tragedies never be repeated filled the days before that anniversary. The coincidence was a reminder that nature also bears her scars of attack. I began by sauntering up from the Kings River along the same drainage Muir had followed into the groves. Two decades after Muir ascended the Mill Creek drainage, it became the conduit for the export of the greatest of sequoia genocides. Rails and hoists brought Converse Basin lumber to Millwood near the top of the drainage. From there, fifty miles of flumes floated clear-cut sequoias and other trees down to the valley town of Sanger.³³

The expense of bringing a harvest from such difficult terrain insured that no profit was ever generated. When the first corporation went bankrupt, a second took its place, and then a third. When neighboring forests were depleted, a second and longer flume was constructed farther east at Hume Lake, and other groves were likewise successively harvested until 1917, when the hemorrhage of trees and profitless logging stopped. But this did not happen before nearly two hundred million board feet of lumber and perhaps the greatest sequoia grove in existence were lost.³⁴ The world needs timber products, but Muir wryly noted: "No doubt these trees would make fine lumber after passing through a saw mill, as George Washington after passing through the hands of a French chef would have made good food."³⁵ Entities should be valued with a sensitivity not exclusively determined by our immediate hungers.

Twenty miles and four thousand feet of elevation gain brought me to my first pilgrimage camp at Millwood – the site of the town, mill, and flume that sent

the lumber out of the mountains. The Forest Service maintained a small campground at Millwood. All physical evidence of the town, mill and flume were gone, save an interpretive sign. Not a single mature tree remained. The groves of sequoias began a mile from Millwood. I walked up and northeast toward Converse Basin Grove, but first through the smaller Cherry Gap Grove. It was an ecological lesson in the long-term consequences of past sins. Clear-cut logging practices create thick regrowth of shrubs and young trees that form ideal conditions for subsequent intense and all-consuming fires that are difficult to control. Sixty years after the logging of Cherry Gap Grove, the McGee fire returned as a second horseman of the apocalypse and burnt through much of the Mill Creek basin.³⁶ Half a century later, I walked through small spires of thick young sequoias again attempting to reform mature forest. At Converse Basin, the century-old forests were farther along the journey of recovery, but still far from re-establishing the physiognomy of a mature forest. I walked by the Chicago Stump – the remains of perhaps the largest tree ever logged – that was displayed at the Chicago World’s Fair.³⁷ From there I traveled south to Grant’s Grove.

Four years after my 2011 saunter, the entire length of those two days of pilgrimage path were again consumed by intense fire. In September of 2015, the Rough Fire burned 237 square miles of mountain habitat.³⁸ Clear-cut areas such as Cherry Gap Grove and Converse Basin were again consumed, but the mature forests of Grant Grove where Park Service preventive prescribed fires had reduced fuel load were spared with difficulty. Past ecological sins may indeed be visited on the third and fourth generations. These clear-cut forests may have entered cycles of regrowth-fire-regrowth-fire that are difficult to escape. Restoring what has been lost by past practices is more problematic than preserving what still remains. Muir’s urgent preaching about forest preservation achieved much, but the scars still persist.

One of the great benefits provided by a pilgrim’s perspective is to note not only the deep wisdom of those whose paths we retrace, but also to recognize the ways in which their understandings were inadequate and how our world changes. Muir understood fire to be, after logging, the second great threat to the forests. He did not perceive how frequent, low-intensity surface fires promoted sequoia reproduction and reduced the threat of catastrophic, all-consuming crown fires. The beauty he passed through was not untouched wilderness, but

in part a legacy of Native American fire management. Federal land management accepted and practiced the received wisdom that all fires were evil for almost a century. The past half century has required intense effort to reverse the threats to forests caused by past practices. Pilgrimage southward into Kings Canyon and Sequoia Parks took me through groves where fifty years of concerted Park Service effort have reversed the century of fire suppression policies that inhibited sequoia reproduction and threatened the existence of the large trees.

New challenges arise with each new age that earlier prophets did not consider. "Heaven knows," Muir wrote, "John the Baptist was not more eager to get his fellow sinners into the Jordan than I to baptize all mine into the beauty of God's mountain." Success in attracting millions of the public annually to the groves eventually led to a damaging human footprint in locations such as Giant Forest. Twentieth Century camping, cabins, concessions, and roads affected the health of the forest, and the effort to reverse these impacts also took half a century.

Muir encouraged mountain pilgrimage by noting, "I know that our bodies were made to thrive only in pure air, and the scenes in which pure air is found." Late 20th Century smog from nearby populated areas began to affect the health and survival of Sierra forests, especially at the elevation of sequoia groves which, in the southern Sierras, sit just below the elevation where temperature inversions trap smoggy air. In our ecologically interconnected world, protecting a mountain temple from damage requires changing human behavior hundreds of miles away from the scene of the harm.³⁹

The most significant challenge to the forests now stems from the very threat Muir sought to discount. Muir understood that climates had changed in the past. His was the first generation to decipher the riddle of the Pleistocene ice ages that had relatively recently departed. Indeed, Muir's fame came first from his discovery of glaciers in the high country of the Sierra Nevada and the effect of past glaciers in shaping Sierran landscape. He was confident that nature's hand in changing climates would not threaten sequoias' continued survival.

Species develop and die like individuals, animal as well as plant. Man himself will as surely become extinct as sequoia or mastodon, and be at length known only as a fossil. Changes of this kind are, however, ex-

ceedingly slow in their movements, and, as far as the live of individuals are concerned, such changes have no appreciable effect. Sequoia seem scarcely further past prime as a species than its companion firs... , and judging from its present condition and its ancient history, as far as I have been able to decipher it, our sequoia will live and flourish gloriously until A.D. 15,000 at least – probably for longer – that is, if it be allowed to remain in the hands of Nature.⁴⁰

Today, climate change is no longer a natural feature, but a present and future consequence of human technology that has altered the chemistry of the atmosphere through fossil fuel combustion and deforestation. It now poses the greatest threat to the integrity of ancient forests. Recent studies show that mature, large trees are experiencing increased mortality rates across western North America, even when the effects of forest fires and bark beetle epidemics are excluded.⁴¹ Climate change is implicated as a major contributor. Trees that persist for centuries and millennia can only reach maturity when the climate in their current location remains within their limits of tolerance, as it has for the past five millennia. Anthropogenic climate change alters all of this. It is sobering to saunter through grove after grove of sequoias and recognize that this mountain zone will likely not be optimal for these trees in coming centuries, or perhaps even later in our own. Forest preservation may depend upon dramatically curtailing climate change and unprecedented management of nature if aspects we love and value are to be preserved.⁴²

Regarding his own sojourns into nature, Muir once wrote to his wife Louie: “Only by going alone in silence, without baggage, can one truly get into the heart of the wilderness. All other travel is mere dust and hotels and baggage and chatter.”⁴³ Retracing the path of a spiritual forebear through physical space provides powerful reminders of change. Muir walked an almost impossibly difficult path from north to south, sometimes only able to encourage his mule Brownie a few short miles through difficult terrain. Little else can generate an appreciation for predecessors than attempting a similar physical following. We each have our limits. Muir was eventually driven from the mountains by the impending winter, but not before exploring the distribution of the sequoias to their southernmost extent along Deer Creek southeast of Porterville. I had scheduled two weeks that led me through fifteen groves along 150 miles. Some

were along old Forest Service dirt roads, some were along well maintained trails. There were places where timing and legality required me to walk on paved highway with cars, trucks, and buses. In other places, old trails were disappearing due to lack of maintenance, and sometimes the only option was to walk as Muir did cross-country through trackless landscape. It was a fitting reminder that contemporary pilgrimage is inevitably a melding of ancient and modern, tradition and innovation.

When Muir learned his friend Jeanne Carr was to come to the mountains, he wrote her, “Most persons visiting the Sequoia grove spend only a few hours in it and depart without seeing a single tree, for the chiefest glories of these mountain kings are wholly invisible to hasty or careless observers. I hope you may be able to spend a good long time in worship amid the glorious columns of this mountain temple.”⁴⁴ I sat for an hour near the feet of the largest tree on the planet on the sixth day of my pilgrimage. I watched hundreds of visitors make their way down to General Sherman Tree from the parking lot half a mile distant. I listened to a half dozen languages of people who had traveled across the state or nation or world to see this one tree. I saw more people in that hour than in all other hours of my two-week pilgrimage combined. Most soon returned back up the trail where tour buses waited to take them to Disneyland or Las Vegas. Perhaps one in twenty turned south to spend the day sauntering through quiet paths of the forest.

I approached the grove named for John Muir two days before my pause below General Sherman. A late afternoon storm forced an early and hasty retreat into tent-shelter. When the pelting rain subsided an hour later, I emerged to a gloaming world wet and fresh. Climbing a small nearby rise, I looked west to see a ridge-top of Muir Grove giants, silhouettes against a golden sky. The next morning I sauntered into the grove and sat for an hour. The nearby campground had closed for the season and no other human was within a mile—but I was not alone. Pine and fir trees, dogwoods and hazel bushes were all fellow congregants. It was the type of experience that prompted Muir to muse:

Another glorious Sierra day in which one seems to be dissolved and absorbed and sent pulsing onward we know not where. Life seems neither long nor short, and we take no more heed to save time or make haste than do the trees and stars. This is true freedom, a good practical sort of immortality.⁴⁵

ALTERNATIVE PILGRIMAGES

Within two years of following John Muir's path, I walked the medieval Camino de Santiago pilgrimage route. The iconography along the Camino is revealing. Every place of worship, from the smallest country church to urban cathedral, depicts Spain's patron Saint James in one of two forms. Sometimes he is the lean and earnest pilgrim evangelist in simple clothing, his hands holding either a pilgrim staff or the word of salvation, or even raised in a sign of blessing and peace. So committed was James to following the way of Jesus that he became the first apostle to be martyred. Yet the iconography in church and cathedral more often presents James riding upon a great steed, clothed in red battle garb, shield in one hand and sword in the other, triumphantly slaying God's earthly enemies. This is Santiago Matamoros – Saint James the Moor Slayer – who, according to legend, miraculously appeared to lead Christians in triumphant battle against the Moors during the long Reconquista of Spain. The flow of pilgrims toward Santiago offered struggling Christian kingdoms of the northern Iberian Peninsula a source of recruits in what came to be seen as a holy crusade against Islam.⁴⁶ The pilgrimages of Christians on the Camino de Santiago had diverse outcomes influenced by the vision of faith they chose to live by.

A common pilgrim metaphor is that we are only passing through this present land which is not our home, that we are bound for a better, sacred land. Harm ensues when sacred destinations blind us to the sacredness of our present place and way. Jihadi warriors willingly sacrifice their lives in suicide bombings for heavenly reward. Exclusive focus given to eternal salvation of souls may dampen the urgency to care for a suffering body of flesh and blood. The allure of future national greatness justifies the marginalization of groups who do not fit the current categories for inclusion. The expectation of an impending

other-worldly kingdom of heaven leads to the self-fulfilling prophesy of environmental apocalypse.

Pilgrimage as a journey through sacred space requires a different walk. Catholic priest and paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin maintained: “Faith has need of the whole truth.” Pilgrimage as a metaphor for our individual and collective journeys of faith will function best when it embraces and finds its foundation in religious and contemporary knowledge. Little in nature is now better documented or more significant than the understanding that we journey with our fellow planetary travelers through vast reaches of space over vast stretches of time. Of equal import is the understanding of how quickly and profoundly we are shaping this land with which we travel. Proper destinations are important if pilgrimage is to be more than aimless wandering in the desert, but a vision such as John Muir’s of sauntering through, as well as to, holy land is equally essential.

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NOTES

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⁴⁵ Muir, *My First Summer*, 39.

⁴⁶ Maria Rosa Menocal, *An Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Spain* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 2002). Menocal traces the transformation of centuries of Iberian religious toleration into conflict justified by religious identity.