

Book review

Sacred Nature "Restoring Our Ancient Bond with the Natural World" by Karen Armstrong
2022 Alfred A. Knopf, publisher

Karen Armstrong is an award winning religious historian. I have enjoyed several of her books (i.e. "The History of God", and "The Lost Art of Scripture"). So I was surprised when she came out with a book about religion and the environment.

The title and the sub-title are telling. Ancient religions and societies considered nature sacred. She also mentions poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge as regarding nature as a sacred entity. The sub-title sets the stage for Armstrong's typical stroll through the ancient writings and beliefs of religions such as Confucianism, Daoism, Hinduism, Buddhims, Judaism, Islam, and Greek philosophy. She also has briefer comments about Christianity, but is critical of the modern version in regard to its disregard for the sacredness of nature.

The tie in to the environment is in the introduction: "While it is essential to cut carbon emissions and heed the warning of scientists, we need to learn not only how to act differently but also how to think differently about the natural world. We need to recover a veneration of nature that human beings carefully cultivated for millennia; if we fail to do this, our concern for the natural environment will remain superficial."

In the chapter, "Mythos and Logos" Armstrong lays out the outline of the book. "Each of the following chapters explores ideas, attitudes or practices that were essential to the way people experienced nature in the past. Each chapter offers a building block that will help us to create or rediscover within ourselves a new attitude towards the natural world and so deepen our spiritual commitment to the environment."

Each chapter concludes with a section titled, "the way forward." Armstrong applies the theme of the chapter to how one can understand and act on regarding the natural world as sacred and how we can positively relate to it. For instance in the chapter, "The Golden Rule," she shows how the Confucian version of the rule included, not only interactions with humans, but also with the natural world. "Above all, perhaps, we should embrace the neo-Confucian's vision of humanity forming 'one body with all things.' Awe at the natural world and unity between humanity and nature are beautifully expressed in the image of human beings forming a trinity with heaven and earth." Shortly afterward Armstrong quotes Jesus in Luke 6:27-37 to show the Christian understanding of compassion the golden rule elicits.

I am reminded of a verse in the hymn: "This is my Father's World." "This is my Father's world; he shines in all that's fair. In the rustling grass I hear him pass; he speaks to me every-where." Perhaps if we sit still and silently in the natural world, we will begin to understand that it is sacred because God is everywhere present in it.

John Hanson