**See nature as sacred, and do as you will**

***Sacred Nature*, by Karen Armstrong (The Bodley Head, 2022)**

*Sacred Nature* is the 16th book from one of the world’s most popular religious commentators. In 1981, Armstrong’s first book, *Through the Narrow Gate* (Macmillan, 1981), told the story of her entry into a strict convent while still a teenager, and how her years as a nun led to the complete loss of her faith in the God that had drawn her to the convent. In her subsequent autobiographical work, *The Spiral Staircase (*Harper Collins, 2004) she related how she developed a new conception of God. Much of her lifetime’s work in the history of religion has explored this new conception of God as it seems to her to have taken shape in many of the world’s religions although much less so, in her view, in the Christianity of her native culture and early faith. *Sacred Nature* continues this theme of exploring what to Armstrong is the most acceptable conception of God, and its superiority to what she sees as the Christian conception. Specifically, the book argues that this new conception of God can be a key factor in persuading us to take a view of the natural world that will help avert the obvious environmental dangers that now face it.

But Armstrong’s concerns in this book are not just the natural world. In the chapter, *Our Broken World,* she laments the plight of those in war-torn Yemen and Ukraine, the deaths of refugees in the English Channel, the racism that led to the death of George Floyd and the poverty in the otherwise immensely wealthy United States and the city of London, where she lives. Her wider message involves a plea for *compassion.* This she has developed previously in her *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life* (The Bodley Head, 2011) and through the Charter for Compassion that she launched in 2008. She roots this ethic in ‘*The Golden Rule’* (another chapter title here)*,* the moral requirement to treat the other as oneself, which lies at the bottom of most religious ethics and moral philosophies. Interestingly, there is a largely unnoticed tension here in that The Golden Rule and the virtue of compassion tend to be human-centred, and often imply the moral uniqueness of humans : we must value most those who are most like us. *Sacred Nature,* on the other hand, largely aims to offset homocentricity with a plea for the sacredness and thus presumably the equal value, of allliving things, even, perhaps, all existingthings.

To this end much of the work explores how, in many religious traditions, there is a sense of the sacredness of all things. This is explained in relation to Chinese religion and philosophy, through such notions as *Qi,* and *Dao*, through Hindu concepts like *Brahman,* through Zen Buddhism and the doctrines of Jewish Kabbalism. Armstrong’s agenda requires arguing that in the Judao-Christian tradition this recognition of the sacredness of *all* things is less obvious. Christianity, and the Judaism that informs it, are presented as religions which developed the idea of a single, all-powerful, creator God who exists over and against the natural world that He brings into being. For both religions, mankind is given a primary place and is made the custodian of nature. Armstrong argues that in Christian theology from the late medieval period onwards – Duns Scotus is mentioned as a starting point here – there is a highly rationalistic view of God as a kind of supreme, ordering Mind. This conception is seen as feeding into the early European Enlightenment when Christian scientists and philosophers such as Descartes, Leibniz, Clarke and Newton expanded the idea of the universe as the expression of God’s supreme rationality with rational man as the pinnacle of creation, the world of nature becoming merely ordered matter, subject to both divine ordination and scientific and human control. This, Armstrong argues, is the outlook that underlies the way in which Western modern man – now assisted by the rise of secularism – looks in a detached way at the natural world, and has become its failed custodian. This kind of argument is, of course, not original, being the thesis of an influential attack on Christianity’s apparently negative influence on the environment by Lynn Townsend White, in 1967, and repeated by others since.

To counteract this picture Armstrong, applying ideas she has explored in more detail in earlier works such as *A History of God* (Vintage, 1999) and *The Case for God (*Vintage, 2010), suggests that what is needed in the mind of *Western* man is a re-realisation of the true nature of God. God should not be seen merely as a vastly superior being who nevertheless exists alongside other beings, and who stands over and against the natural world in His heaven. Rather God should be aligned closely with such ideas as *Qi, ‘*Qi is not a god or a being of any kind; it is the energy that pervades all life’, or Dao, ‘the Dao becomes the ineffable, unknowable source of being manifest in the *de,* the sacred ‘power’ that makes every ‘thing’ that exists’. Within the Western tradition, Armstrong reaches beyond what she sees as the rationalised, Enlightenment God of modern Christianity toward the 1st century, neo-Platonic conception of the One, found in her favourite Western philosopher, Denys the Areopagite. For Denys, the One, like Qi and Dao, lies beyond all rationalisation. Nor is it a detached ‘creator’ of the world, rather the natural world is an ‘outpouring’ of the divine goodness of the One. On all these traditions, the natural world has the divine passing through it, making each thing sacred, as if it were almost a part of God.

So Armstrong’s central message is that we need a new, largely non-Western sense of God in order to recover a vision of sacred nature and limit the damage that is being done. We need to acquire an ‘understanding of the divine as an inexpressible but dynamic inner presence that flows through all things’. She frequently appeals to Wordsworth’s famous lines from *Tintern Abbey.* We need to reach to ‘something far more deeply interfused,/Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,/And the round ocean, and the living air’. It is a passionate, eloquent appeal, rooted in her considerable scholarship.

What Armstrong does not offer us, though, is much specific guidance on how we may avert catastrophe. Her book ends with an appeal for a ‘transformation of mind and heart that will impel us to repair the damage. But she is not, of course, Greta Thunberg, and few *actions* are suggested. Most of her chapters end with a section entitled *The Way Forward.* In one she suggests that acquiring a conception of God, as ‘an inexpressible … presence that flows through all things’ is a crucial step, opening our minds and hearts to nature. As we have seen, this message is particularly aimed at those who allegedly have a largely *Western* conception of God. And yet we know that of the three worst polluters in the world, two of them, China and India, are cultures in which Armstrong’s ‘new’ conception of God is, by her own account, most widespread. The complex cultural, political and *religious*  lesson we should learn from this tension is unclear, and not addressed by Armstrong.

What recipes for action Armstrong does provide are uncontentious, but sometimes at the risk of cosiness. She suggests ‘sitting in a garden or a park for ten minutes a day, without head-phones or a mobile phone, simply registering the sights and sounds of nature’. Silence and what the Chinese call ‘quiet sitting’ are frequently advocated, and we are told, very reasonably, that we should think twice before driving the car or taking a flight. What is missing is any of the sense of urgency that Thunberg, and other climate activists, give us with their warnings of absolute climate catastrophe within a generation or two if we do not do something radical like become carbon free tomorrow. Whether we can continue to board aeroplanes is, for Armstrong, a question that we ‘must *consider* (my italics) globally, with our neighbours in all parts of the world, if we want to save the planet’. For a climate commentator like George Monbiot, though, the time for ‘consideration’ is past, ‘We now know that it’s not enough to leave fossil fuels in the ground and decarbonise our economies. We’ve left it too late’ (https://www.monbiot.com/2022/01/31/carbon-colonialism/).

On an issue closer to Armstrong’s central argument for the *sacredness* of all nature, it is perhaps worth reminding ourselves that one of the major environmental issues facing us is the correct position to take on the eating of animals, a practice that supports a huge food industry with an enormous impact on the natural world. About one third of all methane sent into the atmosphere comes from cows. If, as Armstrong wishes to argue, we must regard all living things as *sacred*, including cows, it seems to follow that we cannot eat them if there are suitable alternative foods. *Sacred Nature,* does not address this consequence of her position. Nor does Armstrong address a similar issue raised by her book, that has preoccupied many environmental philosophers, which is the ethical status of living but inanimate things like trees. The persistent assertion that they too should regarded as ‘sacred’ can feel a little airy in the absence of more guidance on what follows from this, as well as more attention to precisely what it means.

*Sacred Nature* is, despite these weaknesses, an eloquent appeal for change in one’s spiritual outlook, and a hope that such a change will bring about significant practical benefits. Its central claim, that a certain kind of change in our conception of God is crucial, actually raises more interesting questions than it answers, and there are philosophical questions about the ethical implications of claiming that nature is sacred that Armstrong does not begin to address. So those who are looking for recipes for battling the destruction of nature may end up feeling a little dissatisfied with this book. However, Augustine once said, *love God, and do as you will*, leaving you to figure out the detail once your spiritual orientation was right. Armstrong’s message here might be summed up similarly as *see nature as sacred, and do as you will.* It is motivational, but you will need to figure out the detail, and also move quickly.