

Karen Armstrong. *Sacred Nature: Restoring Our Ancient Bond with the Natural World*. New York: Vintage, 2023. Pp. 239. ISBN 9781529114799.

By Senad Mrahorović

Today it is hardly possible to write about any theme that involves significance of the concept of sacredness, especially in spiritual or religious context, without discussing facets of modern civilization that have cast a tick shadow over the very essence of the cosmic hierarchical existence, including that of natural environment. Although a number of scholarly works in this regard have been written much earlier by authors such as R. Guenon, F. Schuon, M. Lings, S.H. Nasr and others, it was not until recently that problems such as climate change, biodiversity loss, ecological pollutions, resource depletion to name but a few, have been actualized all over the world, and thus received a serious attention worldwide. However, additional concerns questioning not only the ecological threats but the future of humanity have emerged with the development of advanced technologies and increasing disorder on socioeconomic and geopolitical arenas. In the midst of that, Karen Armstrong's latest work entitled "*Sacred Nature: Restoring Our Ancient Bond with the Natural World*" may serve as a reminder for humanity to rethink their orientation relating to the purpose of their very existence. The book invites readers to reconsider their relationship with nature, including themselves, urging them to either look back to ancient wisdom or within their own souls in order to find a straight path forward. In other words, the book is both a call to reawaken human reverence for nature and thoughtful exploration of how different religious traditions have long realized and maintained the sacredness of the natural world from within and without.

Following the path of the aforementioned scholars, and being herself a foremost authority in comparative religion, Karen Armstrong begins her work with a concise critique of modern Western thought that has gradually reduced the natural world from all its meanings and symbolism to a mere source of material exploration largely inculcated for the commercial purposes and benefits. Having been seen through the lens of sacrality and veneration by all ancient civilizations, nature has now become stripped of its indispensable features, matching almost entirely the transformation of man in a descending order from the pontifical state wherein he/she symbolized the breach between heaven and earth, endowed with "best stature" to use Qur'anic illustration, to the state of promethean creature, representing a rebellious mortal who has stood up against everything that comes from heaven, while destroying whatever is found on earth and even beneath its colorful and rich tapestry.¹ In her introduction, Armstrong has systematically covered the path of intellectual and scientific development of the world, especially the West for the past few centuries, concluding that with rise of rationalism, materialism, and modern science and technology, the world has become almost entirely disconnected from nature. For her, as for

¹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and Sacred* (New York: State University Press, 1989), pp. 160-188.

traditionalist scholars, the modern Western civilization, being developed “along purely material lines only,”² has led to economic consumerism and commodification of natural world in most industrialized and secularized societies. This detachment from the sacredness of nature has led to the disdain of its organic limits, contributing to the current ecological crises. For Armstrong therefore, the remedy to this predicament lies in rediscovering the sacredness of nature as the crucial process to transform human attitudes toward the environment.

In the following chapters of the book, Armstrong has explored some of the essential concepts related to the doctrinal perspectives of nature held by different religious traditions from ancient times. Her style of comparative discussion of those various beliefs and practices may well be situated in the context of interfaith and intrafaith dialogue and be used as a paradigm to initiate different approaches to the otherwise old and already fixed platform for ecumenical policies that usually revolve around the surface of any given discussion. What is striking about Armstrong’s approach is the way she presents these traditions not as isolated or contradictory systems, but as interconnected sources of wisdom that, when considered together, can apprise a more holistic and sustainable worldview. Armstrong is particularly interested in how these religions regarded the natural world as a manifestation of the Divine. In these traditions, nature is not an assortment of inert and simply material objects to be controlled and consumed, but a living, dynamic, and symbolic manifestation of the Sacred. Through an exploration of how different religions conceive of nature as sacred, Armstrong suggests that the key to restoring our bond with the natural world lies in reinvigorating this sacred view of nature in contemporary life. Interestingly, this perspective stands opposite to that of modernized humanity which according to Martin Lings, believes that the centuries prior modern enlightenment “were considerably less good, and that the further back we go, the worse the world becomes.”³ What the author of *Sacred Nature* proposes is not something new, but rather a restoration of that unified source of wisdom shared by most ancient and traditional civilizations.

In her discussion of the Abrahamic faiths for example, Armstrong highlights how Judaism, Christianity, and Islam share a common heritage of reverence for creation, though in different forms. This might be taken as a starting point for initiating the concept of nature with all its aspects as one of crucial subjects for interfaith dialogue in our times. However, Armstrong doesn’t fail to draw attention to those biblical narratives of creation, in which the sacredness of nature is often overshadowed by the emphasis on human dominion over it. The interpretations of those stories have led to a number of theological schools within Judeo-Christian tradition and significantly contributed to the negligence of spiritual dimensions of nature. Nevertheless, she maintains that a deeper understanding of Judeo-Christian teachings, especially mystical doctrines, can to certain

² Rene Guenon, *The Crisis of the Modern World* (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2004), pp. 81.

³ Martin Lings, *The Eleventh Hour: The Spiritual Crisis of the Modern World in the Light of Tradition and Prophecy* (Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1987), pp. 15.

extent reveal a more nuanced and eco-centric view of creation, one that emphasizes care and stewardship rather than exploitation.

Although, in Judaism and Christianity nature is not regarded as a significant element, in Islam, as Armstrong explains, nature is viewed as a Divine revelation besides the Qur'an. She points out that the concept of "*āyāt*," (pl. of *āyah*) or signs of God, embedded in natural phenomena, offers a powerful vision of Divine presence in the natural world by virtue of endless manifestation of God's wisdom and beauty in every act of creation and its maintenance in both, physical and metaphysical domains. The Qur'anic constant insistence upon believers to contemplate on natural phenomena points out that nature represents the prime miracle of God for it contains, as the author rightly suggests, extraordinary signs in its manifold forms such as food and water it provides to all earthy creatures. Natural world therefore has a function similar to that of the Qur'an, that is, the guidance upon Divine path, besides a splendid beauty and safe refuge it offers to all inhabitants on earth. In short, the nature is sacred for it belongs to God and unveils God as the Qur'an states: "The East and the West belong to God; wherever you turn, there is His Face. God is all pervading, all knowing."⁴

In addition to that, Armstrong discussed a few other Islamic concepts related to the subject of nature. For example, the Qur'anic notion of human being as Divine "*khalīfah*" (vicegerent) on earth, the concept of "*tazkiyat al-naḥs*," (purification of the soul), the idea of "*mīzān*" (equilibrium), among others, clearly suggest in her view a moral responsibility or even religious duty for believers to realize and maintain the balanced and sensible relationship between them and natural world. These and other doctrines of monotheistic religions, Armstrong has often compared with similar teachings and beliefs found in the Eastern religions and philosophical traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism and others. Throughout the chapters of the book, a reader is presented with meaningful and harmonious connections and similarity between various concepts taught by those religions. The method of her research clearly sets an excellent platform for interfaith dialogue in domain of natural environment and the way believers of different backgrounds should approach this subject in order to, at least reduce the challenges posed by environmental crises. Focusing on those comparable teachings about natural phenomena that involves a great deal of spiritual dimensions which brings about a sort of integrated perspective on nature from within various religions.⁵

Throughout the book, Armstrong strongly emphasizes that each of these religious traditions offers a unique and valuable outlook on the sacredness of nature, but that together they present a unified call to respect and care for the Earth. By examining these diverse traditions, Armstrong

⁴ Qur'an, 2:115.

⁵ On the close relationship between spirituality and nature, F. Schuon has indicated that those who are inclined toward spirituality are in principle inclined toward nature, besides solitude but also company of spiritual friends and sanctuaries (Frithjof Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence A New Translation with Selected Letters* [Bloomington: World Wisdom Inc, 2009], pp. 164. This reminds us of Prophetic hadith in which is said: "The earth has been made for me (and for my followers) a place for praying (i.e. *Masjid*) and a thing to perform Tayammum. Therefore, my followers can pray wherever the time of a prayer is due (Sahih al-Bukhari, 438).

shows that there is a kind of universal threads that runs through humanity's spiritual heritage: the recognition that the natural world is not separate from metacosm, nor it is from microcosm, but is an essential part of them. The teachings of these traditions, when interpreted through the lens of environmental ethics and spirituality, have profound implications for how humans should interact with the earth. Thus, one of the essential merits of "Sacred Nature" lies in its capacity to bridge religious divides and create a plentiful space for interfaith engagements as the environmental crisis requires a collective response which can only be strengthened by fostering interfaith collaborations. By acknowledging the sacredness of nature, diverse religious communities can come together to advocate for adequate policies and practices that promote sustainability and protect the environment. Armstrong envisions a world wherein interfaith dialogue and cooperation lead to tangible environmental policies, well-grounded in a deep spiritual understanding of the nature's sanctity.