

BOOK REVIEW

Rogers, Ben ed. *Is Nothing Sacred?*, London: Routledge, 2004.

This collection of essays by philosophers and noted thinkers asks if it is still meaningful to talk of things as being sacred, or if the very notion of sacredness is outdated and outmoded. Exploring topics as diverse as art, life, liberty, science and nature, this is a fascinating and challenging work. Of particular relevance to *Earth Link* are two chapters which question the validity and usefulness of talk about nature as sacred. In the first of these chapters, 'Nature, Science, and the Sacred', Richard Norman argues that there are other and better ways of capturing the kind of value we can and should attribute to the natural world, rather than naming it 'sacred'.

Norman does not want to claim 'instrumental value' for nature, but is also uncomfortable with the concept of 'intrinsic value'. His discussion of the notion of 'intrinsic value' in relation to nature is very compelling. He asks 'what does it mean to say that something has value in itself or for its own sake'? He claims that value is essentially relational i.e. 'value' is a judgment made by an external (human) body, rather than a property of nature, species etc. Norman's argument is very compelling.

He goes on to suggest that the most plausible account of intrinsic value in nature (in the minimal sense of non-instrumental value) is better accounted for in terms of expressive or aesthetic values i.e. our experience of the sublime, that which is emotionally evocative, not merely beautiful, in nature enriches our lives and thus we value it. While we may not like his conclusion, his argument warrants consideration in any framework that explicitly and deliberately links 'nature' and 'sacred'.

In the following chapter 'Is Nature Sacred', Allan Holland offers a response to Norman, expanding Norman's discussion of intrinsic value in nature, noting that to claim that nature has value – intrinsic or otherwise – means that humans are in a position to stand in judgement on nature.

Holland is willing to concede sacredness to human life, but not to nature. He sees the term 'sacred' as a 'bigger' term than could be applied to nature i.e. he describes the sacred as that whose gainsaying constitutes a violation (as opposed to a miscalculation, injury or mere wickedness). He suggests that to apply the term sacred to nature is to borrow from a domain (the supernatural) that is defined precisely in opposition to the domain (nature) to which we seek to apply it.

Holland asks why Norman chose only the sublime rather than the beautiful, or indeed the mundane, miserable or monotonous aspects of nature, in determining expressive value in nature. He asks if it is possible to extrapolate from an experience of the sublime in nature (as evocative, expressive or even sacred) to an experience of far-from-sublime nature as evocative, expressive or even sacred? If not, where does this leave nature as a whole?

Two very provocative essays which will challenge and stimulate any reader committed to engaging with the concepts of nature and the sacred.