

## **A HISTORY OF GOD**

by Karen Armstrong. Ballantine Books, New York 1994

Worship of gods began as soon as men and women became recognizably human, at the same time as first works of art are created. "Like art, religion has been an attempt to find meaning and value in life, ..." The experience of transcendence seems to be a characteristic of the human mind. Religion is an attempt to integrate it into the rest of psychological and cultural experience. The idea of God is formed by each generation or culture with a meaning connected to that society. The meanings for different cultures may be incomprehensible, contradictory, or even mutually exclusive of one another. Within the same culture conceptions of God change over time. Every idea of God has a history.

The book is a history of the idea of God in the monotheistic Biblical religions- Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Armstrong has some very specific things to say about religion and its role in human psychology and human development.

### **SOCIAL AND CULTURAL PURPOSES**

Armstrong starts from the basis that religion has a social purpose. It follows that an idea of God must serve a function for a culture in order for it to have a following of any kind. "...It is far more important for a particular idea of God to *work* than for it to be logically or scientifically sound. As soon as it ceases to be effective it will be changed." By "working" Armstrong means that it accomplishes something for the individual practitioner. For example, among pagan peoples and even with early biblical figures, for a god or goddess to work, he or she must deliver what is promised. That would be fertility, either of the family or the land, victory in war, etc. With many gods to choose from, the individual could simply leave one and choose another if disappointed.

With only one God, the changes came to the religion itself as the social or cultural circumstances changed. For example, in Judaism during the Exile to Babylon, survival tactics became part of the religion. Benevolence and compassion were emphasized. No one was to be sacrificed to save the community. Humiliation of anyone, whether of the religion or not, was one of the most serious offences. Its usefulness was to keep the community united during a stressful time and to prevent scapegoating. In addition, the rabbis stressed that God wanted his people to be happy. Joyfulness became a religious virtue. This was in response to the difficulties that people were experiencing.

Later, in Christianity, with the rise of a capitalistic merchant class in the 15th and 16th centuries, people began to feel that their lives were in their own hands. This led to seeking a religion that they could personally control and experience, rather than the institutional and distant Catholicism of the day. The new "Reformation" religions of Luther, Calvin, and others who emphasized a personal relationship with God met their needs more closely.

Armstrong points out that people will normally resist change unless the change fits into their social and cultural circumstances better than what is currently being practiced. So major changes in religious practice come about in response to altered conditions.

### **GODS VS GOD**

Traditional societies were permeated with a sense of the spiritual. Perhaps because of their closeness to the natural world and their awareness of lack of control over it, people experienced unseen forces constantly at

work in their lives. They sought to contact these forces and get them to work for them. The personalization of the forces into gods with more or less human characteristics expressed their sense of affinity with these forces. The dramatic and evocative stories, which we call myths, about gods and goddesses, helped people to describe these forces and relationships. Although she gives no evidence in support of the assertion, Armstrong says that myths were not meant to be taken literally, but were metaphors for “a reality that was too complex and elusive to express in any other way.” Likewise, imitation of the behavior, looks, or actions of the gods enabled people to share to some degree in their power and effectiveness.

Myths also connected people to a history before their own factual history and to a future beyond their own factual future. The sacred mythology provided not just an ideal toward which people could aspire, but also was the prototype on which life here on earth was modeled. Everything in their world was believed to be a replica of something in the divine world, including ritual and social organization as well as mythology and religion. Even though the modern monotheistic world would not accept the idea that everything in the everyday world has a counterpart in the sacred world, some things are still done in imitation of God – resting on Sabbath, for example.

Armstrong uses myths of Babylon to delineate some common ideas found in early religions. Ideas such as: the ordering of the universe out of chaos, how the earth was created, the special place of their culture in the eyes of the gods, the connection between gods and men (mankind partakes in some way of divinity through the gods’ act of creation). The gods and humanity were seen as different levels of the same race. Mankind is created from the blood of a slain god (albeit, in Babylonian myth from one of the stupidest and least effective of the gods). The pagan vision was holistic. “Men were not slavishly imitating the gods as hopelessly distant beings but living up to the potential of their own essentially divine nature.”

In early religions, creative acts were seen as part of this divine nature. Sexuality and death were part of ancient rituals and mythology. Many middle eastern religions have tales of the slaying of one of the gods, who then goes or is taken to the underworld and must be found and redeemed by another usually a goddess who is his sister/wife. This death and rebirth cycle was celebrated in both harvest festivals and sometimes ritual sex symbolizing wholeness, harmony, fertility and the cyclical nature of life.

## **EPIPHANY / PROPEHCY / DOGMA**

Not all religions regard transcendent experiences as divine. Buddhists, for example, see it as part of the natural world. However, all religions accept that this experience is not expressible in ordinary terms.

The pagan religion is probably the religion attributed to Abraham in the Bible. There is always a tendency to project later religious beliefs back onto early mythical figures. So many would assume that the biblical patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) were monotheists. This is probably not true. They would have been more likely to believe in the existence of the same gods as their neighbors in Canaan. But as with most pagan peoples, they probably worshipped only one of the several available. It is even possible that each of them worshipped a different one. Certainly the god who appears to Abraham has the same name (El) as the high god of the surrounding Canaanite culture. This type of divine apparition, known as an epiphany, was quite common in the pagan world of antiquity. The *Iliad* is full of such epiphanies, often happening in dreams, when the borders between the human and divine worlds were believed to be more open. It is a reflection of the holistic view held by early cultures that such encounters were to be expected. Any passing stranger could turn out to be a manifestation of a god, as happens to Abraham, when El appears to him as a friend and even eats with him. There is never any surprise expressed at these encounters. Later, as people became uncomfortable with these types of encounter, they found ways to explain them that fit with their own notions of God. One way was to describe them as belonging to a “golden age” of the patriarchs when such encounters were frequent. Usually, this meant that the patriarchs were purer or in some other way more deserving of the advice and personal

involvement of God than people “today.” Another way was to reinterpret them as encounters with angels, rather than with God himself.

Early gods were often territorial and related to certain places. Early biblical stories may have the protagonist wake from a dream encounter and recognize that he has slept in a holy place. An example is the story of Jacob’s ladder, where Jacob then sanctifies the place (Beth-El, house of El) in the usual method by upending a stone. Standing stones were used all over the ancient world to indicate religious locations. After his dream, Jacob decides to take El (or *Yahweh*, as he is also called) as his *elohim* or lord. Another type of epiphany appears in the Bible as well as in early Greek mythology...Jacob meets and wrestles with a stranger even winning the wrestling match. His release of God is an occasion for demanding and receiving a blessing. Jacob seeks to know the name of his opponent. In the ancient world knowing an individual’s name was often associated with having power over him.

Later, in the Axial Age (800-200 BCE), the Prophets experienced their epiphanies with great emotional and sometimes physical turmoil. The interaction with God or an angel was terrifying and the prophet was often nearly overcome by it. This is in direct contrast with the experience of the Buddha or of Hindu Yogis of the same time period. They underwent a long preparatory process in order to experience their encounter with serenity. The practitioner sought enlightenment. The Hebrew prophets and Mohammed, the Prophet of Islam and even Jesus, were reluctant prophets. They were taken by surprise. They protested their unworthiness or inability to do God’s bidding. Another difference was that the encounter results not in the imparting of personal knowledge, as in Buddhism, but in action. The prophet would be characterized by obedience to God’s will. He is a messenger to the people with word of that will.

Often the message is one of exclusiveness. The God of the prophet is not one of many, but the Only God. In Hinduism and Buddhism, the multiple gods are not repudiated but rather ignored. The goal is to get beyond them to a greater level of knowledge. But for the Hebrews the idea of being God’s Chosen People is part of the message brought by the prophets and continued on into Christianity and Islam. This is sometimes experienced as a responsibility, but all too often has become an excuse for persecution of those who do not share the same views. The message also brought the idea of social justice. Israelites would be the first people in the ancient world to establish a welfare system. However, the altruism and compassion preached by the prophets only applied to fellow worshippers. The fear and loathing for worshippers of other religions was something new and reflected great anxiety and repression in the culture. The suppression of the older gods and particularly goddesses was reflected in the decline of the status of women. The rise of cities had led to a more masculine world, where martial and physical strength were most highly valued. Ideas of God changed to reflect this as well.

When Christianity became the state religion of Rome uniformity of belief became a desired goal. Structures of the Church were codified and rules of worship defined. Like the laws of the Roman Empire, Church law was to be singular and universal. Here begins the persecution of many of the sects within Christianity, which had comfortably existed side by side until then.

## **EXPERIENCE/REASON**

The doctrine of the Incarnation of God in Jesus is similar to a development in India at about the same time. In both Buddhism and Hinduism there was a rise in devotion to exalted beings, such as the Buddha or Krishna and other Hindu gods who had appeared in human form. This personal devotion seems to express a perennial yearning for humanized religion. It makes the faith more accessible to people and gives a personal relationship to the ultimate. In Buddhism the new idea was that of the Bodhisattva, or the individual who, out of compassion, puts off his own private attainment of Nirvana in order to help those who are still struggling. Here again is the idea of suffering for others’ sake. Christ or the Bodhisattva is a mediator between humanity

and the Absolute. But in Buddhism there are innumerable avatars, and Bodhisattvas, reminding the faithful that ultimate reality cannot be expressed in any one form.

Early Christianity was not concerned with theory and theology, but with emotional experience. It appealed to people who felt lost, adrift and displaced in the Roman world. It manifested itself in many forms. Some seem closer to Greek Mystery religions than to Judaism, others the reverse. Later, when Constantine converted and Christianity became the state religion of Rome, Church structures became organized and systematized, specifics of doctrine began to be debated. The logic of the Greeks ran into the mysticism of the early Christians. There was a struggle to resolve problematic ideas. As the divinity of Jesus became dogma (not so in the early church), how it was possible for him to be both Man and God became a difficulty. This was further complicated by the question of how to define a single all-powerful God, if he could become Man...and so on. Christianity has also been plagued by the dichotomy of personal experience vs. institutional ritual and control. Often disagreements of interpretation have been dealt with in violent and repressive ways. From early times on passionate camps arose with particular emphases on particular kinds of experience or particular interpretations of meaning ... Such doctrinal obsessions are unique to Christianity and particularly to Western Christianity. The struggle continues today.

## **PHILOSOPHY/ MYSTICISM**

The distinction between esoteric and exoteric truth is very important in the history of God. Although Western Christianity never developed a strong mystical tradition, Eastern Christianity, Judaism, and Islam all did. For all four, the rational, philosophical pursuits also became important. Mysticism is predicated on the idea that some truths are inexpressible and cannot be shared in any way other than a metaphorical one. Armstrong comes back again to the natural experience of transcendence and how a religion deals with it. For Western Christianity, its exclusive reliance on the Word and on the teaching of religion (catechism) excluded this experience and it never became as widespread as with other religions. As the emphasis on the rational grew, the dogma of the church seemed less and less relevant. Armstrong credits this exclusion of the mysterious with the so-called "Death" of God in the 19th Century. It also led to the rise of many of the schisms within the Western church – the Reformation, the rise of Fundamentalism, etc. Each new form is an attempt to experience that which has been excluded by the dominant form, and each defines the TRUTH in its own way and, usually, excludes all others.

Within Eastern Christianity (often called Eastern Orthodox Christianity), Judaism, and Islam the mystical experience became a strong subtext to the more structured religious system. All three emphasized, as did Buddhism and Hinduism, the need for preparation prior to the experience. There seems to be an agreement, worldwide, among mystics that the process involves unlocking or untying the assumptions that prevent the practitioner from experiencing the transcendent element in life. There also seems agreement that the individual cannot progress alone, but must have a teacher, who has been through the process, as a guide.

Philosophers struggled in another way. Their goal was to prove the existence of God through logical argument. They also sought to understand the nature of God in the same way. There were many who began with the philosophical way, then, dissatisfied, switched to the mystical one. This is particularly true where the mystical was accepted as a legitimate part of religious practice.

## **EMOTION/ REASON/ TRANSCENDENCE**

Humans have a sense that something is wrong with their condition; feeling at odds with themselves and others and feeling disoriented and out of touch with their inner nature continually drive them to seek answers and experiences that unite and order the world and give them a sense of their place in it. Armstrong's history

encompasses the ways religion and, more specifically, the monotheistic religions based on the Bible, have met people's needs.

The emotional need can be seen as including a need of the individual to belong to a social group and the need for the group to hold together, the need for support during hard times, the need for a way to keep hope alive and to fight despair. Emotional needs can also include justification for one's actions, ways to channel aggression and frustration, ways to build self-esteem. Different religions seem to address different states more or less successfully. Christianity seems to work best in adversity, while Islam seems more adapted to success.

The rational needs are for explanations of how the world works and how one fits into it. Armstrong shows how as the scientific revolution progressed, religion and God became less and less relevant to it. The earlier intense philosophical arguments about the nature of God, the attempts to prove His existence, seem almost quaint today. Yet the rise of fundamentalism speaks to a need for structures and reasons, not met by the separation. Fundamentalism is anti-historical. It believes that the experiences of earlier peoples were exactly the same as they are today. It posits a Truth and denies any variation from it. It gives the mind security and answers to the troubling questions raised by our existence. But all philosophical precepts help individuals to see the world as sensible, rational, and predictable.

The transcendent need is more difficult to describe. By its very nature, it is nonverbal. Yet most religions have developed recognition of its validity. Sometimes, as with Islam, it is considered the heart of the belief. It is seen as available only to a few of the adherents of any religion. Like the creative urge, its satisfaction requires a devotion of extraordinary amounts of time and effort. It leads to creative output in the form of art, music, poetry and prose, all with metaphorical and allegorical content that allude to inexpressible experiences. Even for those who do not follow this path, the fact that those who do share some inkling of their experiences, gives a confirmation of the intuitive sense of something beyond everyday experiences.

## **MODERN RELIGION**

In her final chapters, Armstrong addresses the issues of religion today. In the Christian West, the triumph of the rational, dogmatic forms of religion after the Reformation led to Atheism as a rational choice. The dependence on a personal god, a "celestial Big Brother," was rejected by those who saw it as incompatible with human dignity. In the 19th and 20th centuries, some moved to a scientific view without the need for a god. The conflict between the emphasis in traditional Christianity on the literal truth of the Bible and post Darwinian scientific discoveries fueled this opinion. Likewise, rigid anti-sexual, anti-pleasure elements in the religion made little sense to some. Others resolved the conflict by adopting a more allegorical interpretation of the Bible. In the Romantic Movement of the 19th Century, artists of all kinds sought new meanings for their intuitive experiences. Many of these were quite similar to interpretations offered by mystics in other religions.

For Islam there has been a struggle to reconcile religious views with an increasingly backward economic and political position. Colonial existence did not mesh well with a religion of success. The Koran taught that a society that lived according to God's will could not fail. The historical greatness of Islamic culture seemed to confirm this. Modern Islam seems to have only two choices: copy the West or reject everything about it. The copiers often went overboard, forbidding traditional dress, language, worship. Their failures (in Iran and Turkey, for example) show how hard it is to replace cultural values by fiat. In addition, by suppressing more moderate forms of religion, they left a vacuum easily filled by extremists.

For Jews, the particular horror of the last two centuries drove many away from religion altogether. Others replaced it with a political focus on the state of Israel. For those desiring to retain a connection to their religion, reinterpretation of the laws was necessary.

The 20th Century compresses all the responses of previous times into a very short period. Finding a meaning for God and religion in a dark time has created many different adjustments. There have been

reformers in all three faiths, seeking a more rational justification. They see the proscriptions and prescriptions of the religion as outdated and unnecessary. They come up with new forms of ritual.

There have been those who have rejected all previous ideas of God. For those who experienced the death camps of WWII, the idea of a God active in the world seems ridiculous, particularly if this is a just and compassionate God. Yet there is a desolation that comes with the loss of God. There seems to be a human need for a connection to a larger truth.

There has been a rise in what we call fundamentalism in all three religions. Armstrong sees it as a retreat from God to make human, historical phenomena such as “Christian Family Values,” “Islam,” or “The Holy Land,” the focus of religious devotion. She calls it a new form of idolatry. “This kind of belligerent righteousness has been a constant temptation to monotheists throughout the long history of God. It must be rejected as inauthentic. The God of Jews, Christians, and Muslims got off to an unfortunate start, since the tribal deity Yahweh was murderously partial to his own people. Latter-day crusaders who return to this primitive ethos are elevating the values of the tribe to an unacceptably high status and substituting man-made ideals for the transcendent reality which should challenge our prejudices. They are also denying a crucial monotheistic theme ... the ideal of compassion.”

“Human beings cannot endure emptiness and desolation; they will fill the vacuum by creating a new focus of meaning.”