



The Future of God

Interpretive Review

Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: The 4000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994).¹

KAREN ARMSTRONG spent seven years as a Roman Catholic nun.

After leaving her order in 1969, she took a degree at Oxford University and taught modern literature. She has become one of the foremost British commentators on religious affairs and . . . [has taught] at the Leo Baeck College for the Study of Judaism and the Training of Rabbis and Teachers. She is also an honorary member of the Association of Muslim Social Sciences. Her published works include *Through the Narrow Gate*, *Beginning the World*, *The Gospel According to Woman*, *Holy War*, and *Muhammad*.²

In her book *A History of God: The 4000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, Karen Armstrong

explores the ways in which the idea and experience of God evolved among the monotheists [believers in only one God] — Jews, Christians and Muslims.

Weaving a multicolored fabric of historical, philosophical, intellectual and social developments and insights, Armstrong shows how, at various times through the centuries, each of the monotheistic religions has held a subtly different concept of God. At the same time she draws our attention to the basic and profound similarities among them, making it clear that in all of them God has been and is experienced intensely, passionately and often — especially in the West — traumatically. Some monotheists have seen darkness, desolation and terror, where others have seen light and transfiguration. . . .

We look first at the gradual move away from the pagan gods to the full-fledged monotheism of the Jews during the exile in Babylon. Next considered is the development of parallel, yet different, perceptions and beliefs among Christians and Muslims. The book then moves “generationally” through time to examine the God of the philosophers and mystics in all three traditions, the God of the Reformation, the God of the Enlightenment and finally the nineteenth- and twentieth-century challenges of skeptics and atheists, as well as the fiercely reductive faith of the fundamentalists of our own day.³

The “Old” God

There is a common thread that runs throughout the history of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. All three monotheistic religions present a paradoxical — that is, seemingly contradictory — picture of God. On one hand, the Supreme Person, Being or Essence is infinitely remote. He is wholly impassible (untouched by pain and suffering), immovable, and immutable (unchangeable). On the other hand, by such means as emanation, energy, demiurge (subordinate deity), spirit, or “divine spark,” God is lodged in the deepest recesses of the human mind, heart and soul. Here he lies, waiting to be called forth through man’s reason, meditation, metaphysical thought, ecstatic experience, ritual, liturgy or sacrifice.

In this paradoxical view God is unattainable by mankind (male and female) or is merely evoked for the present satisfaction of the individual. The existence, presence and revelation of such a God are irrelevant to man’s history and community. This God is devoid of compassion. He is untouched with the feeling of our infirmities. In the end he can only deny future existence to mankind or absorb selected members of the human race into his own universal Oneness.

This God of man’s own projection waylaid Western culture and civilization 4,000 years ago and has held them hostage ever since.

Furthermore, this God of Judaism, Christianity and Islam has no connection with man’s current understanding of the cosmos and its evolutionary development. He has no real relationship to man’s tragic pilgrimage through history or to man’s culture, philosophy, science and aspirations. Moreover, the startling fact is that the mythical God of the great monotheistic religions is death. He is extinction and annihilation. This God of man’s own projection waylaid Western culture and civilization 4,000 years ago. He has held them hostage ever since. Now he has brought mankind to the brink of global genocide. The human race no longer can survive this demonic being. This God must be forever burned from the conscience and consciousness of humanity.

From the ashes of this deified phoenix, there must arise a “new” God — One who is consistent with man’s “proleptic” (anticipatory of the future) nature and “transcendent” (God-related) needs. That is, there must arise a God who is vitally related to mankind’s historic pilgrimage and ultimate destiny to become fully and truly human. To grasp this “new” God” we need to return to the beginning.

The “New” God⁴

“Before” the beginning, in the absence of all else, God was, in a sense, unknowable, impassible and perhaps even unchanging. However, with the initiation of the cosmos, the Creator necessarily related to his Creation. For God this meant that he had become the Creator Being. For the cosmos this meant that it existed as God’s created entity.

In order to assure the continuity of the infant cosmos and the process of its emergent evolution, God established active boundaries for the universe. These

boundaries are the laws that not only permit development but also guard the universe from ultimate catastrophe and extinction.

With the subsequent creation of life, followed by its emergent evolution, God again provided boundaries within which life could be secure. He implanted instinctual laws for the survival, migration and countless other activities of animals. Likewise, God endowed man with instinctual laws as he emerged from other primates. Then, with the passage of time, man's animal instincts began to be supplanted, first by "god-consciousness."⁵ Still later in man's development, God specifically provided him with the consciousness of so-called "negative" laws — "Thou shalt nots" (see Exodus 20:1-17). These "Thou shalt nots" placed boundaries on man's individual and communal existence in order to assure the continued emergence of his freedom. Thus, God indeed was the God of law.

However, beginning about 4,000 years ago, man began to define God in a way that excluded him from any real relationship with humanity. God was made available only to those with the esoteric tools to supposedly evoke him from the depths of man's being. In this situation man began to evolve increasingly restrictive, partisan law codes — codes that reflected his own primitive, instinctual past. Unfortunately, the intervention of the prophets failed to make any lasting impression on the ancients. Repeated prophetic announcements of the God of compassion, mercy and freedom were ignored or rejected.

"Ever since Moses brought the tablets of the Law from Mount Sinai, the majority have preferred the worship of a Golden Calf, a traditional, unthreatening image of a deity they have constructed for themselves . . ."

—Karen Armstrong

The prophets fulminated against their contemporaries who thought that temple worship was sufficient. Jesus and St. Paul both made it clear that external observance was useless if it was not accompanied by charity: it was little better than sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal. Muhammad came into conflict with those Arabs who wanted to worship the pagan goddesses alongside al-Lah in the ancient rites, without implementing the compassionate ethos that God demanded as a condition of all true religion. There had been a similar divide in the pagan world of Rome: the old cultic religion celebrated the status quo, while the philosophers preached a message that they believed would change the world. It may be that the compassionate religion of the One God has only been observed by a minority; most have found it difficult to face the extremity of the God-experience with its uncompromising ethical demands. Ever since Moses brought the tablets of the Law from Mount Sinai, the majority have preferred the worship of a Golden Calf, a traditional, unthreatening image of a deity they have constructed for themselves, with its consoling, time-honored rituals. Aaron, the high priest, presided over the manufacture of the golden effigy. The religious establishment itself is often deaf to the inspiration of prophets and mystics who bring news of a much more demanding God.⁶

In "the fullness of time" (Galatians 4:4, NRSV), God finally acted to end the prophetic era. He acted to transform his relationship with mankind by personally defining compassion and human freedom and the boundaries required to assure that

freedom. He acted as the incarnate Christ, who lived, ministered, died and rose again. That Christ is present with us today and always (Matthew 28:20, NRSV). As Martin Buber (1878-1965), the Austrian philosopher and Judaic scholar, declared:

The I–Thou realm . . . reveals the presence of God. Life [is] an endless dialogue with God, which does not endanger our freedom or creativity, since God never tells us what he is asking of us. We experience him simply as a presence and an imperative and have to work out the meaning for ourselves. . . . The I–Thou encounter mean[s] freedom and spontaneity, not the weight of a past tradition.⁷

In “the fullness of time” God acted to transform his relationship with mankind by personally defining compassion and human freedom and the boundaries required to assure that freedom.

Summary

The God of the three great monotheistic religions — Judaism, Christianity and Islam — is alleged to be impassibly secreted in/beyond the inaccessible recesses of the universe or hidden deep within individual human hearts. Either way, his existence has become wholly irrelevant to modern and postmodern man, who is actively engaged in dominating the earth through global genocide. This genocide can be abated only by a consciousness that God has not just placed boundaries on man’s

God is mediatorially present to create forbearance, love and compassion in “I–Thou” relationships, which alone can assure the survival of mankind and its continued pilgrimage toward full and true humanity.

instinctual drives but also has made himself personally present as the Mediator of all human relationships. He is mediatorially present to create forbearance, love and compassion in “I–Thou” relationships, which alone can assure the survival of mankind and its continued pilgrimage toward full and true humanity.

Endnotes

1. Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: The 4000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, is available from Barnes & Noble at www.barnesandnoble.com/w/history-of-god-karen-armstrong/1100010281.

2. Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: The 4000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), end matter.
3. *Ibid.*, book jacket.
4. See “The Openness of God,” *Outlook* (Prequel 1994.4).
5. See Julian Jaynes, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1976).
6. Armstrong, *History of God*, p. 392.
7. Quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 386, 387.

This article was originally published June 1994 under the Quest imprint.

Copyright © 1994 Worldview Publications