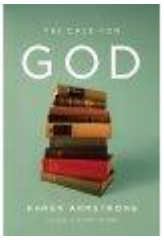

The Case for God: What Religion Really Means by Karen Armstrong

The Sunday Times, review by Christopher Hart

Karen Armstrong is a former Catholic nun who has written highly acclaimed biographies of Muhammad, Buddha and, most recently, the Bible. Her new book, with its crucial subtitle, is more of a polemic, albeit of the gentlest sort. It is clearly intended as a riposte to all those blasts of aggressive atheism from the likes of Richard Dawkins[1] and Christopher Hitchens[2]. Reading Armstrong after these boys is like listening to a clever and kindly adult after a bunch of strident adolescents.

Both Bible-bashing fundamentalists and dogmatic atheists have a similar idea of what "God" means, she points out, and it is an absurdly crude one. They seem to think the word denotes a large, powerful man we can't see. Such a theology is, she says, "somewhat infantile". The only difference between the fundamentalists and the atheists is that the former affirm this God's existence, the latter deny it and try to demolish it.

The new atheists, Armstrong says with impeccable restraint, "are not theologically literate", and "their polemic? lacks intellectual depth". In contrast, she usefully reminds us, both Galileo and Darwin, supposed icons of modern atheism, were adamant that their discoveries had no impact on religious faith. Equally humble in a different way, Socrates pushed rationality and intellect to the point where they fail: you reach his famous aporia, and realise you really know nothing at all. The new atheists do the opposite. Their rationality and intellect bring them to a place of absolute knowledge, a height from where they survey all history, and pronounce with finality on pretty much everything. Never trust anyone who knows this much.

Yet for centuries, ideas of God and the Bible were far more subtle and profound than today's atheism or fundamentalism can conceive. "We have lost the 'knack' for religion," says Armstrong. It is as if the success of science in the material world has rewired our brains, made us tone-deaf to myth. "Is it true?" we keep asking, meaning, "Did it really happen? Is it literally true? If not, we're not interested."

She draws on 2,000 years of Christian theology and mysticism to demonstrate rich alternative ideas of the divine. Back in the fourth century AD, long before Wittgenstein and Derrida, Bishop Basil of Caesarea understood all about the limits of language, and stated them rather more clearly, too. "Thought cannot travel outside was, nor imagination beyond beginning." God is, by definition, infinitely beyond human language. Earlier still, the Christian scholar Origen (185-254) discussed the "incongruities and impossibilities" in scripture. The fact that Dawkins et al think that pointing out the Bible's imperfections undermine Jewish or Christian belief only demonstrates their ignorance of the traditions they presume to undermine. Of course it's not meant to be understood literally, the early Christians seem to sigh across the centuries.

Armstrong further shows how even the words "I believe" have changed, and become scientised, to mean "I assert these propositions to be empirically correct." Yet the original Greek *pisteuo* means something much more like "I give my heart and my loyalty." In the gospels, she says, quoting the great German theologian Rudolf Bultmann, Jesus himself sees God not as "an object of thought or speculation, but as an existential demand".

Yet thanks to the misapplication of science to religious faith, we remain literal-minded and spiritually immature, frightened of the silence and solitude in which the Ancient of Days, the Unnameable, might be experienced, though never understood. We need to think of God not as a being, but as Being. Armstrong points us towards a vast tradition in all religions in which, in essence, you can ultimately say nothing about God, since God is no thing. In Islam, all speaking or theorising about the nature of Allah is mere *zannah,* fanciful guesswork. Instead, try "silence, reverence and awe," she says; or music, ritual, the steady habit of compassion, and a graceful acceptance of mystery and "unknowing".

As a haunting example, she recounts this unforgettable story. Among the many Jews who lost their faith in Auschwitz, there was one group who decided to put God on trial. How could an omnipotent and benevolent deity allow this horror? Either he didn't exist, or he wasn't worthy of their love anyway. "They condemned God to death. The presiding rabbi pronounced the verdict, then went on calmly to announce that it was time for the evening prayer." God is dead — but, Armstrong suggests, all we have lost is a mistaken and limited notion of God anyway: a big, powerful, invisible man who does stuff. Instead, we need to recapture the spiritual imagination, sensitivity and meditative humility of the pre-moderns, who she so admires.

The Case for God simmers with a quiet spiritual optimism. It is dense and brilliant, chastening and consoling. Whether or not it sells as well as the latest Hitchens or Dawkins will be a measure of us, not the book.

The Case for God by Karen Armstrong, London, Bodley Head, 376 pp . — From The Sunday Times — July 5, 2009.

[1] Rchard Dawkins, *The God Delusion,* Boston · New York, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006, 406 pp. [Editor's note].
[2] Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: The Case Against Religion,* London, Atlantic Books 2007, 336 pp. [Editor's note].