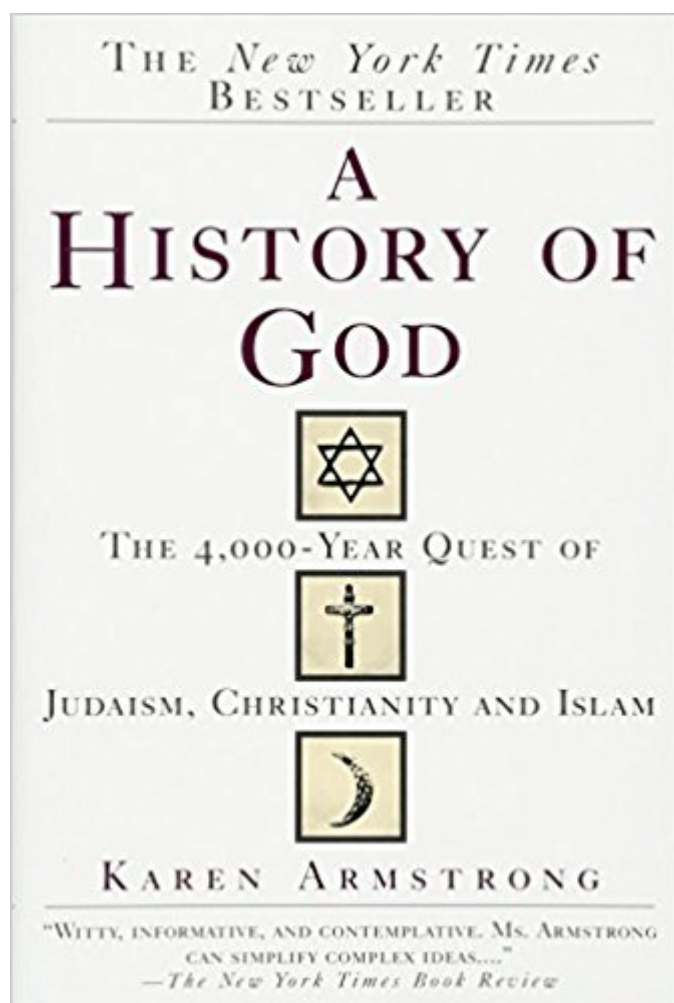


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A History Of God: The 4,000-Year Quest Of Judaism, Christianity And Islam



Synopsis

"An admirable and impressive work of synthesis that will give insight and satisfaction to thousands of lay readers." THE WASHINGTON POST BOOK WORLD
In this stunningly intelligent book, Karen Armstrong, one of Britain's foremost commentators on religious affairs, traces the history of how men and women have perceived and experienced God, from the time of Abraham to the present. From classical philosophy and medieval mysticism to the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the modern age of skepticism, Karen Armstrong performs the near miracle of distilling the intellectual history of monotheism into one superbly readable volume, destined to take its place as a classic.

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Customer Reviews

Armstrong, a British journalist and former nun, guides us along one of the most elusive and fascinating quests of all time--the search for God. Like all beloved historians, Armstrong entertains us with deft storytelling, astounding research, and makes us feel a greater appreciation for the present because we better understand our past. Be warned: A History of God is not a tidy linear history. Rather, we learn that the definition of God is constantly being repeated, altered, discarded, and resurrected through the ages, responding to its followers' practical concerns rather than to mystical mandates. Armstrong also shows us how Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have overlapped and influenced one another, gently challenging the secularist history of each of these religions.

--Gail Hudson

This searching, profound comparative history of the three major monotheistic faiths fearlessly

illuminates the sociopolitical ground in which religious ideas take root, blossom and mutate.

Armstrong, a British broadcaster, commentator on religious affairs and former Roman Catholic nun, argues that Judaism, Christianity and Islam each developed the idea of a personal God, which has helped believers to mature as full human beings. Yet Armstrong also acknowledges that the idea of a personal God can be dangerous, encouraging us to judge, condemn and marginalize others. Recognizing this, each of the three monotheisms, in their different ways, developed a mystical tradition grounded in a realization that our human idea of God is merely a symbol of an ineffable reality. To Armstrong, modern, aggressively righteous fundamentalists of all three faiths represent "a retreat from God." She views as inevitable a move away from the idea of a personal God who behaves like a larger version of ourselves, and welcomes the grouping of believers toward a notion of God that "works for us in the empirical age." 25,000 first printing; BOMC alternate. Copyright 1993 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

The book is separated by 11 chapters.~ Chapters 1-2 (In The Beginning, One God).The author begins by exploring the most primitive conceptions of the divine. She delves into the Axial Age (800 - 200 BCE) and explains the Aristotelian god, Buddhism conceptions (Nirvana, Atman, Brahman), the old polytheistic pagan religions, and the important revelations and that have become expedient in the doctrines and worship of the major religions of the world today (Moses, Abraham, etc). Also - and perhaps most importantly - the author explains how monotheism and the praising of one god came about.~ Chapters 3-5 (A Light to the Gentiles, Trinity: The Christian God, Unity: The God of Islam)As you can probably expect, these chapters explore the roots of the major Abrahamic religions. It is interesting to see the trials and tribulations each one endured. You can expect to read about the evolution of ideas between the religions, how they relate to each other, and their ever-evolving conceptions of outsiders.~ Chapters 6-8 (The God of the Philosophers, The God of the Mystics, A God for Reformers)Perhaps the most interesting sections of the text. In these chapters, history is amalgamated with philosophy: the author explores the 3 major conceptions of God, with how they came about, and then ties them to their implications, doctrines, and perceptions. To explain each briefly: The God of the philosophers came about when God got caught up in the mix of philosophy. As civilizations started to advance, philosophers took it upon themselves to look at and try to prove the existence of God rationally. The philosopher's God was one that can be proven through inquiry and rational thought, and one that should be liable to discourse. For some time many religious sects adopted this game plan for God, for example, the Faylasufs. The God of the Mystics was an alternative: it can not be proven through rational thought because it lay beyond

experiment and observation. The God of the Mystics was one that could be felt deep inside us, and in nature, even though its essence itself was impenetrable. The God for Reformers is a more contemporary, personal, and rule imposing entity. This God was used to reform certain societies and their norms; it was the centerpiece for theocratic empires.~ Chapters 9-11 (Enlightenment, The Death of God?, Does God Have a Future?) If there's history in any sense in these chapters, it is not the main goal of them. These chapters talk about the enlightenment era with its advent of science and technology. This was the time in history where discoveries were made that shattered preconceived conceptions of the physical world, the solar system, and most importantly our place in it. This was the time where we really started to discover that perhaps life does not have any divine meaning, and by observing natural phenomenon we come to see that there is also no purpose. For the first time, it was possible to become an Atheist. Many prominent intellectuals came to abhor the idea of a creator, or master engineer, that that twists and turns the knobs of life and discriminately favors some while punishing others. Much of the general public had severe reservations of how personal God was, and can be, just like the Mystics and the Buddhists. Is God dead? The New Right Christian movement of the late 20th century doesn't seem to portend to any fatality of superstition. Does God Have a Future? Who knows. Apparently the author believes that the God of the Mystics does, which I discuss below. I must concede that what is so prolific about the book is the author's candor. In her sentiment you can detect of a whiff of fate, and thus reckon her intrapersonal disappointment in her tone, but she nevertheless casts her emotions aside to justly display the truth. Much sections of the book reads as if it was written by an atheist. But this doesn't mean that she didn't purvey her opinions. Often you can extrapolate her convictions on matters by the way she alludes to it and by what (I almost said 'who', but that would have been incorrect) she chooses to quote. I'm not an expert on religious matters, but she seemed to be objective - atleast in motivation - for the most part when explicating and trying to explain God's history. I believe that for the most part, such a goal (i.e. objectivity) is not feasible. In the history of divinity and religion; with its prophets and revelations; there are too many uncertainties to be able to explain these topics without a substantial amount of subjectivity. The whole religious enterprise seems to be subjective. This isn't an existential rejoinder, but an observational truth. It's possible for such experiences to be "real", in the non-materialist and neuron-void sense, but it is not plausible. There is admittedly not a complete material understanding of consciousness and the brain, but there is a fairly adequate scientific understanding of it that takes dominion over the archaic notions of Dualism and non-material "magic" that so many intellectuals have resorted (or succumbed) to in the past when explaining subjective experience and the human mind. It seems that the author, Karen Armstrong,

doesn't seem to understand this and I think the contemplative reader is ultimately left in the midst when trying to string together her "God", the one that would purportedly work in the future. She rejects a personal God, and denotes such an idea as unjustifiable, dangerous, and detrimental to religion. So then wouldn't she be a deist? She speaks a lot about deism but doesn't seem to allude to being a deist, per se. She seems to be enthralled by the God of the mystics; the one that lacks shape or form, that can't be anthropomorphized, and is all around us; and that's attainable through introspective practices. She doesn't mention it, but if she doesn't believe that this God created the universe, and is knowledgeable incorporeal entity, than what is the point of God? She seems to insinuate that you need such belief or faith because it attenuates the inner conflict of struggle and inevitable death, but this conclusion is parochial in nature and it does not deserve any kind of fidelity. I would also like to mention, as other reviewers did before me, that she seems to paint Islam in good light. She is in no way a Muslim, but perhaps she felt propelled to be a little persuasive in tonality when speaking on behalf of Islamic religion and Koranic scripture because of prevailing vitriol and inflicted cultural subjectivity in the Western portrait of Islam. This of course was around the time the book was published (1991), and i'm sure although Islam deserves much of it, many academics nevertheless go overboard; that is, doing it fallaciously; in demonizing it. The problem is that Armstrong's fervor shows in this aspect, and often seems to undermine and juxtapose the other major monotheistic religions which seems like an effort to bring them down just to enhance the comparative look of Islam. At one point she seems to blame the downfall of what used to be an open-minded and rationally motivated religion (i.e. Islam) on the Westernization of Islamic territory through Colonialism. This seems like a feeble attempt to deposit blame on other things while simply ignoring requisite facts of an (or at least what came to be an) inherently destructive religion. Maybe some positive light needed to be shedded, because anything that is entirely bad doesn't last long. Even though Islam may have, or have had, some good tenets, I still remain a little skeptical of its exegesis in this text. Note that when I say "seems that the author, Karen Armstrong, doesn't seem to understand this...", i'm coming from my pre-conceived conviction in the fidelity of Materialism (which is what I meant by "this"). In other words, I'm assuming it to be the truth, which many people - especially readers of this book - wouldn't adhere to. Even though I don't necessarily agree with everything the author has to say, the text itself was engaging and I sincerely enjoyed reading it. There is a lot of information to be gleaned and I do recommend it. It deserves a high rating. 4.4/5

Could A History of God be a masterpiece, a classic or perhaps a new system to explain the great religions? I think everybody would benefit from reading/listening/viewing this work to understand

what Wikipedia calls Liberal Christianity. I've both listened to the book and seen the documentary and I believe the documentary is far superior because of the interviews. The documentary shows not only interviews but also historical great works of art depicting scenes from scriptures. In this light one sees the quest to interpret ancient scriptures through the ages by painters. The author, Karen Armstrong, is listed as a fellow of the Westar Institute. This organization sponsors the Jesus Seminar, which votes using colored beads to determine which sayings attributed to Jesus in the gospels really occurred. The Jesus Seminar found that only 18% of these attributions were likely uttered by Jesus. The Seminar found, for example, that parts of the beatitudes were spoken by Jesus while other parts were not likely to have been spoken by Jesus. The Jesus Seminar uses strict methods upon which to base their votes on the authenticity of parts of the scriptures, and the color of beads used are red, pink, grey and black. The main lesson of *A History of God* is that God changes. Yet that goes against most religious teachings. I am not endorsing this position or any position. There are some obvious things that support this argument such as the Old Testament need to use animals for blood sacrifice. We don't do that anymore in general, so our beliefs have changed somewhat over thousands of years. The author takes this view to its logical conclusion, demonstrating how it's possible that society's viewpoint of God at any particular time is unique for that time and always subject to change. The author's supporting documentation is that the nature of religious doctrine changes over time. A great deal of the history of thought about God, especially Christian thought, is surveyed and one would need a solid background in the subject to properly evaluate the merit of this approach. It's possible that God didn't change but the way people understood God changed. In this context we could believe that God became revealed little by little over human history, and each time anything was revealed it was to teach humans what needed to be taught at the time. Another approach would be to not use colored beads to vote on parts of the gospels and accept them all on face value. Then we'd possibly conclude that the ancients might have known some things better than we do today, a position which would be in conflict with Liberal Christianity.

The content is not very well organized. In my opinion there are two main issues: 1) Chronological consistence: It is extremely hard to stay focus as you read. The author keeps changing tracks in presenting the topic. Chronological consistency, I believe, is very important to fully understand and follow the storyline for such an interesting subject. This of course is not a history book, but taking advantage of "time" in framing the content would have been very useful in motivating the reader to stay eager to keep reading. 2) Lack of boundary between author's opinion and historic accounts:

Author keeps introducing her opinion in the middle of telling historic events, and in almost all occasions, the story is left unfinished as the reader gets bombarded with too much of author's opinion mixing with what has been told in history. OVERALL: despite the fact that the topic was very appealing to me, I had to really push myself to go to 1/3 of the book. and unfortunately had to give up on it. I am pretty sure there are better books on this topic.

It's a book for a serious read and should be read many times to be fully understood. Although, I have some disagreements and claim inaccuracies, I agree that it is altogether, a work of extensive research and written without any partiality.

The book, as others have noted, is an overview of complicated topics. As such, it does not give as much detail as one might prefer. I find myself questioning the author's assertions because they seem conclusory and not necessarily based on factual information. However, this is not unexpected given the amount of material she is attempting to cover. I will need to seek out secondary sources, which is not a bad idea anyway.

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