



## The Case for God

Barry Seagren

<h1 style="text-align: center;" align="center">What religion really means  
Have we got it all wrong?  
*THE CASE FOR GOD*  
*What religion really means*  
Karen Armstrong  
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Karen Armstrong was a Roman Catholic nun for seven years before she found she could no longer believe Catholic doctrines. She left her order and is now a highly acclaimed writer and spokesperson on religious issues with at least 15 books to her name. She writes well, is fair and judicious, and is extremely well read. *The Case for God* is a survey of the development of religion from prehistoric times to the present, focussing on Christianity.

It is not a case, because Armstrong thinks it is mistaken to apply reason to faith. And it is not about god in our sense because Armstrong does not believe in god as a personal being who rules over his creation. But it does have a specific thesis to argue. Armstrong feels that the current clash between atheists such as Richard Dawkins and Christians is totally unnecessary and has arisen only because both sides have misunderstood the nature of religion, hence her subtitle, 'what religion really means.'

### Changing views of God?

Her thesis can be seen in the two-part division of the book: Part One — The Unknown God (30,000 BCE to 1500 CE); Part Two — The Modern God (from 1500 CE to the present). She sets this thesis out succinctly in the introductory ten pages

(which are all you really need to read), and then seeks to back it up through the historical survey which makes up the rest of the book. The modern Western world, she claims, has developed notions of god, religion and spirituality which are totally at variance to those which have been held by all the great traditions until recent times. It is this 'modern god' that has led to the current conflict between religion and science.

### Religion as silence and unknowing

God is not a personal being who stands apart from and over his creation. God, Nirvana, Brahman or Dao is simply a name we give to ultimate reality. We can say nothing about god, not even that he/it exists or does not exist. Religious stories were never intended to be understood literally or factually; they are symbolic. The symbols and practices and rituals of religion are there to enable the faithful to get in touch with this transcendent reality, and thus be enabled to better negotiate the vicissitudes of life and to show genuine compassion to others. This is 'what religion really means'. It has nothing to do with historical events or doctrines, nothing to do with a personal relationship to a creator God. To my mind, this vision is closer to Buddhism than to anything else.

### Church history

The historical survey begins with an approving look at ancient Hinduism and Buddhism, and then moves on to the Hebrews. Armstrong drives the bulldozer of higher criticism through the Old Testament and — what do you know — those ancient Hebrews were Buddhists after all. After visiting Classical Greece, she comes to Jesus: 'We know very little about the historical Jesus, since all our information comes from the texts of the New Testament, which were not primarily concerned with factual accuracy.' (Have I misread Luke's introduction to his gospel?) He seems to have been a charismatic healer and a particularly skilled exorcist. 'For reasons that are not entirely clear he was crucified by the Romans. His disciples had visions (!) that convinced them that he had been raised by God from the dead in advance of the Last Days.'

As she moves on to the history of the church, she notes in the fourth century 'a preoccupation with

doctrinal correctness that would become its Achilles heel'. She claims that authentic religion was found rather in the contemplative monasticism of some of the medieval mystics whose emphasis was on 'unknowing' and 'silence'. This she calls apophatic (wordless) spirituality. Even Trinitarian doctrine was intended, she says, as an exercise to come to the point where language fails and the believer experiences extasis. At the end of the 11th century, a new development began, and one that would take Christianity in the wrong direction and lead to our present impasse, namely the application of reason to faith by thinkers such as Anselm, Aquinas and the scholastics.

## Modern god as aberration

The modern period started in 1492. The people of Europe began a voyage to secularisation which was accelerated by three 16th-century movements: the Renaissance, the Reformation and the Scientific Revolution. Christians began to succumb to the temptation to apply the impressive methods of science to the realm of religion. Isaac Newton, in particular, led the way by arguing that the design and complexity of nature pointed to the existence and character of nature's God. 'At a stroke', she claims, 'Newton overturned centuries of Christian tradition. Hitherto, theologians had argued that the creation could tell us nothing about God (Psalm 19?, Romans 1?); indeed, it proved to us that God was unknowable.'

Religion, fatally, had begun to look to reason and science for support. What then would happen when a later generation found another explanation for the design and complexity of nature? Religion would be undermined, as it indeed was when German higher criticism investigated the Bible 'rationally' and Darwin, Marx and Freud produced 'scientific' explanations for human behaviour. Christianity had to fight for its life, which is where we are today. 'But this would not have been the case', she argues, 'had not Christians allowed themselves to become so dependent upon a scientific method that was entirely alien to it.' (Did not Paul point us in a better direction when he argued to Festus that 'What I am saying is true and reasonable ... none of this ... was done in a corner'?)

## Two blindnesses

One of Armstrong's central contentions is that unknowing is built into the human condition. Two groups refuse to recognise this and thus are at each other's throats. One is evangelical Christians who maintain that 'the Bible is literally true — an attitude that is a radical departure from mainstream Christian tradition'. The other group is the new atheists such as Richard Dawkins. 'They adhere to a hard-line form of scientific naturalism that mirrors the fundamentalism on which they base their critique.' Both groups, she says, fail to see that science and religion have separate fields of competence; when they are confused you have bad science and inadequate religion. The solution is for all to abandon the idolatrous lust for certainty. Religious people must shut up on issues like origins and stop presenting 'evidence'; scientists must realise they have nothing to say about things like beauty and goodness.

## Schaeffer to the rescue

What shall we say to all this? First of all, Armstrong's repeated use of the word 'god' gives the impression that we are talking about the same things and that all she wants is a judicious separation of science and religion. Not true; her vision of religion is Buddhist, fundamentally different from biblical Christianity. Secondly, despite all the stress on unknowing, she has her own certainties: the nature of god, the nature of religion and religious truth, the centrality of compassion. Thirdly, I suspect her historical survey is selective. Why, for example, do the early mystics represent authentic religion rather than those who were involved in the doctrinal discussions that produced the classic creeds?

As I read Armstrong, the teachings of Francis Schaeffer kept coming to my mind. In his analysis of the development of modern thought (*The God Who is There*) he argued that the tendency of modern theologians to separate the realm of morals and values from that of science and history was both a departure from historic Christianity and an abandoning of truth. Truth is one. The Bible, he said, is not a scientific textbook, but where it touches the realms of history or science it speaks truly. Armstrong's divided field of knowledge is not a step forward but a step backward.

## The Bible's claim

'True truth', as he liked to call it, is possible. If God has indeed created man in his own image, and if one of the marks of man is the use of language, why could God not communicate to us, in human language, things that are both true to him and true to us? We would then have true truth, though never exhaustive truth. This is precisely the Bible's claim for itself. Furthermore, historic Christianity is actually the highest form of mysticism in that the 'something more' which can never be reduced to words is rooted in things that can be rationally discussed rather than simply being hung in thin air as in the eastern mysticisms.

Buy Armstrong's book, if you like. It is certainly well written, stimulating and interesting, though you will find something on every page to annoy you. But please don't buy the message.

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