



STATEMENT DC625

A History Of God: The 4000 Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

Karen Armstrong

(Alfred Knopf, 1993)

Why did this 460-page history of religious doctrine repeatedly make the *New York Times* best-seller list? Its credentialed British author, a former Catholic nun and scholar of world religions, admires Jewish, Christian, and Muslim mystics while telling sinners what they want to hear: (1) that they are not morally accountable to the God of the Bible and (2) that the substitutionary death of the incarnate Christ is not needed for oneness with God.

According to Armstrong, humanity's basic problem is not depravity, alienation, and condemnation, but the illusion of meta-physical separateness. She favors those mystics who regard God as "totally other" than our mental conceptions. Armstrong thinks that language was developed for materialistic purposes and can have no relevance to God.

Armstrong generally ignores the claims of the sacred writings of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but when she does address them, she treats them as culturally determined opinions. Though she wisely opposes an anthropomorphic god made in our image, she fails to seriously consider the significance of *humankind's* creation in *Gods'* image (Col. 3:10).

To support her assertion that language has no connection with God, she quotes Isaiah 55:8-9 out of context (p. 62). Those verses, however, refer to the wicked whose ways are not God's ways, whose thoughts are not God's thoughts. In fact, the prophet was *affirming* verbal divine revelation.

Armstrong regards the Genesis account of creation as the Babylonian myth of *Enuma Elish* simply clothed "in monotheistic idiom" (7, 63). Ignoring more than 50 years of conservative evangelical scholarship in this highly selective "history," she pontificates: "Nobody has yet to come up with a more satisfactory theory which explains why there are two quite different accounts of key biblical events such as the Creation and the Flood, and why the Bible sometimes contradicts itself" (12). Yet she does not offer an example of a biblical contradiction. Ironically, Armstrong loves to appeal to the law of non-contradiction to criticize classical Christian doctrines, but praises the paradoxical in mysticism (283).

Armstrong professes to find a personal deity inferior because "it can be used to endorse our egotistic hatred and make it absolute" (55). "A personal God like Yahweh can be manipulated to shore up the beleaguered self in this way, as an Impersonal deity like Brahman cannot" (55). Armstrong would have us believe that the nonpersonal god

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becomes “a symbol to challenge our prejudice and force us to contemplate our own shortcomings” (55). That selective reading of history passes over the gross abuses frequently found in pantheistic religions where God (and supposedly enlightened human beings like the recently deceased guru Rajneesh) is understood to be “beyond good and evil.”

In search of support for the doctrine of the Impersonal, Armstrong turns to the Jewish Kabbalists who “had no name for God for ‘he’ is not a person. Indeed it is more accurate to refer to the Godhead as ‘It.’ But the impersonal absolute through ten mysterious emanations ‘becomes a personality.’ In the Kabbalah the Shekinah becomes the female aspect of God, and one of the earliest Kabbalistic texts had identified the Shekinah with the Gnostic figure of Sophia” (244, 247, 249). She approvingly writes that “in Kabbalistic teaching of mystic ecstasy, the mystic becomes his own Messiah” (251).

The major issue, however, is not whether everyone will get to God. People in every religion will come face to face with God – as judge! The issue is, how can depraved, estranged, and condemned sinners ever be acceptable to God? This book tries to convince readers that devout do-it-yourself mystics can reject the gift of Christ’s righteousness and become one with God. But the truth is that those who reject the One who became incarnate, died, and rose for them will hear the Lord Jesus Christ say, “Depart from me, I never knew you” (Matt. 7:23).

— *Gordon R. Lewis*

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