



Karen Armstrong. A History of God (1999)

Once again, the lovely Karen Armstrong provides a tour de force in her intelligent study of the development of the human understanding of God throughout history. For the amateur but interested reader, her books are a readable and rewarding challenge (this one just under 500 pages) as she manages to provide breadth, depth and clarity in complex matters of faith.

Armstrong dates the earliest articulation of the divine at about 14,000 years ago and suggests that the primitive writings in the Old Testament are not strictly monotheistic but rather display a belief in different 'gods' signified by different names. Abraham's 'El' is gentle and mild whereas the 'YHWH' of Moses is absolutely terrifying. The personified interactive 'god' in the early writing is a cause of later embarrassment and eventually makes way for a mysterious 'god' who dwells in a realm apart, knowable only through his Glory as he departs. Eventually, despite the Ten Commandments telling us there are other gods, Judaism emerges as a fully monotheistic faith of commitment to the One true God who expects his people to be characterized by the divine quality of loving-kindness.

Into this context comes Jesus, who, along with many rabbis of his day, embodies this faith. Later, St Paul sees him as replacing Torah as the supreme revelation of God, but it is only after a century or so, under the influence of Greek philosophical categories, that Jesus is fully elevated to the divine sphere.

When the church split around the 5th century, the Eastern tradition found truth and meaning in contemplation: mystery wasn't just 'fine', that was the whole point – God was totally 'other'; whereas the Western tradition continued the more analytical approach. Suspicious of mystery as just a muddle that needed to be sorted out, it constructed complicated formulae for big doctrines with the unedifying – and presumably unintended – result of depicting a God who *could* sort things out but chooses not to, and who knew from the beginning that sin would corrupt and so devised a particularly cruel way of dealing with it in the crucifixion. The full majesty of this perversion of Christianity by the Western Church is uniquely invisible to its adherents, making it a particularly unattractive option for those seeking ultimate truth. Armstrong makes the point that throughout their long developments, most world faiths share a great deal in common. All hold to the declaration that God is One and at the same time that God is revealed through other means: Spirit, Torah, Wisdom, Qur'an, Gabriel, Avatars and Gurus. And all, in the end, declare that God is not a 'thing' – is not part of the created world – and so in a real sense does not 'exist' and yet at the same time the most important reality, to be intuited rather than analysed. There is both a knowability and an unknowability about God, and in all but the modern Western Christian tradition, any 'concepts' of God's nature are mostly considered obstacles to faith rather than clarifications. In almost all other expressions of faith, the two priorities are a commitment to doing the right thing - concern for justice and care for the poor - and worship.

And it is here that Armstrong thinks faith may have a future. When the mythologies no longer speak to the current human condition – especially if those mythologies have created a tyrant God interfering with human creativity, what remains strong is the human need of the numinous, a sense of a purpose and self-discipline in life and a desire to build a better world. It is for the current generation of religious people across the cultures of the world to see if she is right.