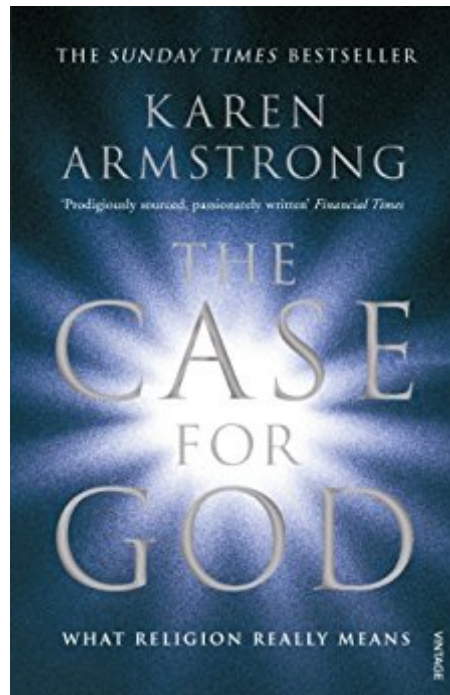




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The Case For God: What Religion Really Means



Synopsis

There is widespread confusion about the nature of religious truth. For the first time in history, a significantly large number of people want nothing to do with God. Militant atheists preach a gospel of godlessness with the zeal of missionaries and find an eager audience. Tracing the history of faith from the Palaeolithic Age to the present, Karen Armstrong shows that meaning of words such as 'belief', 'faith', and 'mystery' has been entirely altered, so that atheists and theists alike now think and speak about God - and, indeed, reason itself - in a way that our ancestors would have found astonishing. Does God have a future? Karen Armstrong examines how we can build a faith that speaks to the needs of our troubled and dangerously polarised world.

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Customer Reviews

Ms. Armstrong correctly points out that most of the angry noise about religion comes from fundamentalists and atheists. Clearly, the author falls into a more tolerant attitude about the various religious beliefs practiced around the world. She does not, however, give a free pass to Christian, Islam, or Jewish fundamentalism OR narrow-minded atheists such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris,

Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens. I've read all four of the atheists' books by the aforementioned and, despite them being highly entertaining and thought-provoking, were of the attitude that we should throw the proverbial religious-belief baby out with the bathwater. Both sides seem hellbent on destroying the other. The author takes pains to explain the evolving nature of religious practices since we converted to monotheism. Ms. Armstrong focuses primarily on Christianity but gives a very quick overview of the Muslim and Jewish history. It's important to pay close attention while reading 'The Case for God.' Skimming over the history of how religious belief was practiced and then reading the author's conclusions is a waste of time. She covers such areas as the intent of the Holy Trinity, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the Age of Reason, the Second Great Awakening, myth vs literalism, many of the movers-n-shakers of religious debate, and religion's complex relationship with science. For the record, I was raised Catholic but have been agnostic now for almost thirty years. Like the other half dozen other works I've read by Ms. Armstrong, she treats her subject matters with respect. She may not agree with their stances, but you won't find the author calling them rockheads or loony. Once in a great while, sarcasm makes a brief cameo, but Ms. Armstrong saves it for the fundamentalists and atheists such as Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris. Both Dawkin-wannabes and fundamentalists have a great resistance to acknowledging the "opponents" may have some merit. I have always finished one of the author's works better informed and reminded that religion is a valuable component for many people in living life.

Karen Armstrong has written an insightful summary of the historical development of the God concept from earliest time to the present. The best review of the major contributions of her case study can be found in the book's prologue and epilogue. Her overview of the ways in which human interpretations of the transcendental "other" have appeared in history is invaluable in sorting out the objects of religious devotion (or the denials thereof) which have challenged human understanding. To convey the scope and artistry of her analyses, I have selected ideas from her book which particularly appealed to me. She presents her case in two parts; the first is The Unknown God (30,000 BCE to 1500 CE) during which ultimate reality was not a personalized God, but a profound mystery which could never be plumbed (mythos beyond logos). Reality that transcends language must be expressed symbolically, which was variously developed: in Hebrew monotheism, in Greek philosophy, in rabbinical Judaism, in early Christianity, in Eastern orthodoxy and in Islamic revelation. Central to many of these developments were the ideas that accessibility to God involved one or more of:

kenosis (emptying oneself of selfishness),
 pistis (commitment to engagement),
 ekstasis (stepping out of habitual thought patterns), all of which required long, hard practice or ritual devotion. Attempts to prove God's existence through logic were proposed, but those who claimed an experience of God seemed to accept the apophatic assumption which was that reason was incapable of encompassing what God was. The second part of the book (1500 CE to the present) covers the period in which religion and science were seen progressively to contradict each other. As the scientific method developed, observational and experimental truths contradicted metaphorical truths in scripture, which were mistakenly taken literally and suppressed for being at odds with doctrine. The philosophical enlightenment of the 18th century attempted to use logic and reason to explain transcendent experience, and this gave rise to deism and atheism but also to literal fundamentalism as a reaction to any attempt to question the veracity of scripture. But secular ideologies, such as the logical positivist's limitation of meaningful inquiry to objective sense data, are as deadly as religious bigotry, and both represent inherently destructive idolatries. Armstrong observes that "every single fundamentalist movement, scientific as well as religious, is rooted in profound fear and is fiercely reductionistic". Just as the monkey trial and the use of suicide bombings illustrate the weaknesses of religious fundamentalism, the holocaust as well as Hiroshima and Nagasaki illustrate the danger of science, unfettered by compassion, as a tool of militarism. If we can no longer look to an all-powerful, oriental-despot God who, if properly appeased by devotion and praise, may bless us with favors, what kind of god does this case study suggest? An answer postulated by recent German theologians seems to hark back to "that profound mystery which could never be plumbed" — a.k.a. the ground of all being. Gould has suggested that God belongs to a religious magisterium, concerned with values which is separated from a scientific magisterium which deals only with empirical sense data. Science itself is an act of faith whereas religion requires response rather than belief. In this reviewer's opinion, Armstrong stops short of summarizing her case, perhaps because she has chosen not to include the insights that have come from analyses of those resuscitated from death or near death. There is growing evidence that consciousness, non-localized to the bodies of individuals in these and other circumstances, can expand to realms similar to, if not identical with, those experienced in mystical traditions, in order to sense that overwhelming oneness and love which is the hallmark of the

perennial God experience.

I am not a religious person, though I was raised that way. Along the way I lost my faith and fell in with the "angry atheist" crowd. I've read just about every book out there decrying religion but I never thought to read any material from the other side of the fence. One day I realized how absurdly biased this stance was so I rented this book from the library. I tore through it quickly and then ordered it from .Armstrong did not convince me to return to my faith, but she did convince me to view religions and their followers in a different light. Learning the history of religions from all over the world, how they have benefitted and furthered science in the past, and how the schism between religion and science came to be gave me a much more favorable view of faith in general. Religion may not work for me personally, but I no longer feel the bitterness and anger towards faith that people have come to associate with millennials who have chosen a life without religion. If you enjoy history and philosophy, get this book. If you are interested in the history and development of religion in particular, get this book. If you are an atheist but are trying to ensure that you maintain a fair and egalitarian view of your fellow human beings (as all atheists CLAIM to do but often fail at) while being as informed as possible, get this book. If you are parents or loved ones of a person who is straying from their faith and you are trying to convince them not to, get this book. If you ARE that latter person, be aware that though you may not succeed in convincing your loved one to maintain their religiosity, you will at least encourage them not to be quite so annoying and rude about their absence of faith.

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