

A History of God: The 4000-year Quest of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam Study Guide

A History of God: The 4000-year Quest of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam by Karen Armstrong

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Plot Summary

As a former Roman Catholic nun and now a college teacher for the Study of Judaism and the Training of Rabbis and recipient of the 1999 Muslim Public Affairs Council Media Award, Karen Armstrong has unique qualifications to author the book "A HISTORY OF GOD, THE 4000 - YEAR QUEST OF JUDAISM, CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM." In the her book, Armstrong traces the evolution of the concept of God from the moment the Hebrew tribes merged in ancient Canaan to form the nation of Israel, through the emergence of Christianity and then the advent of Islam with the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad.

This, in turn, leads to the development of these religions throughout the history of Europe and the Middle East, as the Muslim empire expanded across into Spain, and the Jewish Diaspora promulgated the different branches of Judaism throughout the region. The Christian religion splintered into different sects when the Reformation and the Puritan ethic extended from Cromwell's England to the New World colonies in America where Charismatic Christianity was born.

Karen Armstrong deals with all the different facets of the monotheistic religions and the cross cultural currents in each religion, as Judaism and Christianity were influenced by Greek philosophy, and the coming of the mystics reinforced concepts derived from the Eastern religion of Buddhism.

In the last two chapters Karen Armstrong deals with the emergence of atheism and the secularizing effect of the scientific revolution which occurred when leading writers, such as Nietzsche declared "God is Dead." She points out that the concept of God represents a deep-seated human need, which has existed from time immemorial and that the emergence of so called fundamental movements in all three monotheistic religions, represents a regressive development. Although the exact future of God is unclear, Karen Armstrong points to a religion based on compassion as being the avenue to the creation of a vibrant new faith for the twenty-first century.



A History of God: The 4000-year Quest of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

Summary and Analysis

Karen Armstrong is a uniquely qualified to author the book "A HISTORY OF GOD, THE 4000 - YEAR QUEST OF JUDAISM, CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM." In her book Armstrong traces the evolution of the concept of God from the moment the Hebrew tribes merged in ancient Canaan to form the nation of Israel instigating the worship of a monotheistic God, through the emergence of Christianity and then the advent of Islam and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad. This, in turn, leads to the development of these religions throughout the history of Europe and the Middle East, as the Muslim empire expands across into Spain and the Jewish Diaspora promulgates the different branches of Judaism throughout the region. The Christian religion is splintered into different sects with the Reformation, and the Puritan ethic extends from Cromwell's England to the New World colonies in America where Charismatic Christianity is born.

In the chapter titled "In the Beginning," Karen Armstrong enunciates the assertion that man created a God who was responsible for the creation of the world and for ruling the heavens and earth. This assertion derives from the works of Father Wilhelm Schmidt published in 1917. Armstrong does not judge the truth of this idea, except to state that it cannot be proved or disproved but continues to develop the idea of the one God and, the eventual disappearance of this concept of a single deity, as mankind's experience of the world coalesces into a myriad of animistic and tribal deities.

Starting at about the time of 4000 BCE, Armstrong traces the development of the religious and ethnic conquests and the ensuing migrations, which lead to the development of the Judaic religion, a religion that is inextricably joined with the creation of the Jewish people. This is basically the history of the peoples of the Tigris-Euphrates river complex in what is today's Iraq. Starting with the Sumerians in 4000 BCE, who developed an advanced culture, the city of Babylon emerged as a sacred city in about 2000 BCE when the Assyrians conquered the existing cultures. This Assyrian culture's beliefs and religion had an important influence on the land of Canaan, which eventually became the Promised Land of the ancient Israelites.

As Armstrong summarizes the theology of the Babylonian culture, there is a certain holistic element in it where the gods, and there many, and human beings shared the same predicament of the reality of life, except the gods were more powerful and immortal. The development of the concept of a single deity is attributed to Abraham, who migrated to Canaan from Ur in about 2000 BCE. He was one of three waves of migrants from Mesopotamia towards the Western Mediterranean whose migration spanned the period 1850 to 1200 BCE. The second wave of migrants, according to biblical scholars, was associated with Jacob, Abraham's grandson, and a final third wave of migrants described how they had been liberated from slavery by the Egyptians.



Their leader was Moses. The story of these people was eventually written down in a book called the Bible. In the Bible, it is clear that the people who became the Israelites were a mixture of different ethnic groups bound together in their loyalty to Yahweh, the God of Moses.

Analysis of the early biblical texts show that there are, at least, four different themes or authors. This, in itself, illustrates the different strands of beliefs that became woven into the unity, now called the Old Testament. It also, in the form of residual beliefs and rituals, contains elements of the so-called pagan belief systems of the original Canaanites, for example, the ritual sacrifice of Abraham's eldest son.

Armstrong briefly examines the attributes of Yahweh and the fact that this god, unlike those of the Babylonian culture, is separate and distinct from the forces of the natural world. Then she goes on to take a look at the Vedic religion, which emerged after the invasion of the Indus river valley in India by Aryans from Iran in 1700 BCE. The totally different belief system of the Buddha, Dharma, and Nirvana may have had an effect on the civilizations of the Western Mediterranean, but Karen Armstrong does not examine it in that light.

In Greece, on the other hand, Armstrong describes the new ideas which were evolving and based mainly on the writings of Plato and Socrates in about 400 BCE. Plato believed in the existence of a divine, unchanging reality beyond the world of the senses. These ideas and those of Aristotle had an immense influence on monotheists, particularly the world of Western Christianity.

Karen Armstrong describes the so-called Axial Age, the period from 800 - 200 BCE, as being a period when, throughout different emerging cultures in the region, people began to accept the fact that there was a transcendent element to life, and, accordingly, their belief systems incorporated this idea as they evolved from the earlier ones. The Israeli God Yahweh was also part of this evolution.



One God

One God Summary and Analysis

In the second chapter, Karen Armstrong outlines the origin of the Israeli nation by noting that the northern kingdom of Israel was conquered, in 722 BCE, by the Assyrian king Sargon, and its people were forced to assimilate with the Assyrians and consequently disappeared from history as a separate nation. At the same time the much smaller kingdom of Judah was also under threat.

Armstrong, using historical and biblical texts, describes the evolution of Yahweh, the God of Israel. In the Temple of Judah, various prophets emerged who enunciated the message from Yahweh. Thus Isaiah proclaimed the forthcoming devastation of the peoples of Israel but simultaneously promised them eventual victory and survival. The role of Yahweh now assumed the role of lord and master of history. No longer was Yahweh a champion and defender of a specific people but would visit punishments on them for their transgressions. In addition, Yahweh began to assume a more patriarchal role, and women were becoming marginalized as the prophets developed their image of God. The practice of pagan worship continued, even in the sacred Temple, where Canaanite fertility rituals flourished and there were even attempts to ascribe a wife, Asherah, to Yahweh. Gradually, however, the doctrine of exclusivity developed in the concept of Yahweh and adherents to any other religion or belief system, were ruthlessly suppressed by the reforms of King Josiah. In the books of Joshua, Yahweh became the instigator of a war of extermination against the people of Canaan.

Given the necessity for survival under repeated attacks by their neighbors and forced into exile in places such as Babylon, it is not surprising that the aspect of the Deity, as the protector of the people, emerged, and still, to this day, remains a characteristic of all monotheistic religions.

Armstrong next describes, after the destruction of the Sacred Temple and the diaspora of exile, how there emerged the concept of the synagogue, which was a temple, where it only required the assemblage of more than three believers to constitute a place sanctified by God and where worship could take place. Along with this development came the creation of the Rabbi who, in all functions, replaced the prophets of old. These developments coincided with the return of the Jews to Judah, when the enlightened King of Persia, Cyrus, conquered the Babylonian empire in 539 BCE. The returning exiles brought their new ideas to those who had been left behind and these presaged a new era in Judaism and the continuing evolution of the God Yahweh.

Armstrong finishes the chapter with an exposition of the writings of the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria, which formed a bridge between Orthodox Judaism and the concepts of the Greek philosophers. These writings were never fully accepted, and on Philo's death there were pogroms against the Jewish community in Alexandria. It is perhaps more significant that the Romans had also succumbed to Greek culture when



they established their empire in North Africa and the Middle East. By the first century of the Common Era, Judaism was already established as a potent force in the Roman Empire, and the introduction of Greek ideas, via the Roman culture, would be a significant factor in the emergence of Christian religion.



A Light to the Gentiles

A Light to the Gentiles Summary and Analysis

In this chapter Karen Armstrong deals with the dramatic rise of a charismatic faith healer in North Palestine, a man named Jesus. As Armstrong points out, the earliest account of his life is found in the Gospel of St Mark, which was written forty years after Jesus' death. Even by that time the historical facts were being overlaid with mythical elements, which purported to explain facets of his life in the context of the beliefs of his followers.

Using the writings and gospels of the New Testament as a basis for her exposition, Karen Armstrong points out that Jesus himself never actually claimed to be God and that the expression "Son of God" does not bear the same connotation in Hebrew as it does in Greek, neither was there any semblance of a belief among early followers of Jesus that Yahweh had a son. It was after his execution as a common criminal that Jesus' followers decided that he was divine. To rationalize the shock of his death by crucifixion, his followers subscribed to the belief that he had risen from death to immortality and that he had been, indeed, the promised Messiah.

Karen Armstrong describes how the early followers of Jesus prayed in the temple alongside other Jews and followed the edicts of the Torah. It was the preaching of St Paul that resulted in the belief that the newly emerging religion, in which Jesus was regarded as divine, could and should be embraced by the Gentiles. The emergence of the cult of Jesus from the established church of Judaism was accompanied by passionate dispute, and many disciples of Jesus remained within the conventional Jewish faith, albeit as an exclusive sect.

As the newly founded religion of Christianity spread quickly through the places in the Eastern Mediterranean where the Jews of the diaspora had settled, it also took root in the capital of the Roman Empire. The Romans, initially regarded Christianity as just one more god and religion, which they allowed to exist alongside their own gods and beliefs. It was, after all, a religion of slaves and lower caste people.

Armstrong gives a thorough and detailed account of the various movements and sects which emerged in the first two centuries of Christianity. She points out that the early church suffered persecution from without and dissension from within. As different belief systems within the Christian church blossomed and then subsided, the refinement of the new religion's core dogma continued. In the meantime, many educated, non-Christians, were becoming impressed by the welfare system initiated by the Christian church and the compassion and mutual respect that Christians showed each other. By 235 CE, the Christian church had become one of the most important religions in the Roman Empire and a bastion of stability. In 312 CE, the emperor Constantine converted to Christianity, after the battle of Milvian Bridge, and Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire.



Trinity: The Christian God

Trinity: The Christian God Summary and Analysis

Karen Armstrong describes how the newly established Christian Church in the Roman Empire was almost immediately split by a fierce controversy. The split was to do with the nature of the Christian God as defined by competing philosophers, Arius, the Presbyter of Alexandria, and another philosopher called Anathasius. Specifically, the question was whether or not Jesus was a human person or part of the godhead. It was eventually resolved at a synod, called by the Emperor Constantine, at Nicaea, in what is now modern Turkey. At this synod, the modern Christian creed, the Nicene Creed, was first promulgated

After the synod, confusion still reigned in the Christian church with a competing philosophy developing in Cappadocia, which formed the basis of the theology of the Eastern Orthodox Church. The Greek influence on theology formed the core of the idea of a Divine Trinity, though this was more acceptable to the Eastern Orthodox Christians than to the Western Christians. The Trinity was considered blasphemous by Jews and later by Muslims. Armstrong continues to describe the evolution of the concept of a Divine Trinity as being largely the result of the teachings of Augustine, who was active in the period when the Roman Empire was collapsing under the onslaught of the barbarian invasions. Prior to Augustine's conversion to Christianity, he had repulsed any idea of chastity, but now, possibly under the influence of the collapsing Roman Empire and the consequent beginning of an epoch of chaos, he developed the idea of original sin and the separation of humankind from the perfect God along with the necessity for atonement for sin.

Armstrong goes on to explain that the doctrine of Incarnation had, as a consequence, the diminishment of the danger of idolatry. Once "God" is presumed to exist as a separate external entity, humans can externalize and worship their own prejudices and desires and, consequently, God assumes the attributes of a human being. Other religious traditions, such as the Buddhist tradition, insist that the Absolute is an intrinsic part of human nature. By resolving the question of whether Jesus was human or divine, Christians inevitably had to conclude that Jesus was the first and last Word of God. Not only was the truth an exclusive attribute of Christianity but also any further development of revelation was impossible.



Unity: The God of Islam

Unity: The God of Islam Summary and Analysis

Drawing heavily from the Koran and works such as those of Muhammad ibn Ishaq, Karen Armstrong delineates the amazing rise of the religion of Islam and its prophet Muhammad. Muhammad was a member of the tribe of Quraysh who ruled the city of Mecca in the Hiraz, in what is now the Western province of Saudi Arabia. In the seventh century CE, the Quraysh were emerging from the obscurity of nomadic life in the desert to a life of successful international trading. This was based on the stability provided by the existence of the Kabah, a shrine in the center of Mecca, which was regarded as the most important shrine in Arabia. Muhammad experienced his epiphany during the Ramadan retreat of 610 when he experienced a vision of the Angel Gabriel and subsequently began preaching in Mecca. The Koran, which means "The Recital," is an oral message which transfixed the listeners with the beauty of its language. As Armstrong points out, the Quraysh were already familiar with the concept of a monotheistic God who was the creator of heaven and earth and took the idea for granted. Initially, Muhammad's message was to warn the Quraysh that they should amend their lives and pay less attention to the accumulation of wealth and power.

In the early years of his mission, Muhammad gathered many converts, especially from among the younger generation, but after the first three years, Muhammad's message transformed into a message that al-Lah, the High God, precluded worship of the ancient cults and eventually this led to a rift with the Quraysh in Mecca. Muhammad and his followers faced hostile actions in an attempt to force them to conform. In 622 CE, accepting an invitation from the inhabitants of Yathrib, Muhammad and his followers migrated to what is the modern city of Medina to the north of Mecca.

At Medina, Muhammad came under the influence of Jews, some of whom were well disposed towards him. From them he learned the story of Ishmael, Abraham's eldest son, who had participated in the foundation of the Kabah. Then it became clear to Muhammad that the majority of Jews in Medina were permanently hostile to him and he instructed his followers to prostrate themselves in the direction of the Kabah in Mecca instead of Jerusalem. At that point, the Muslims enacted a religion, which acknowledged a single God, embodied in the primordial religion of Abraham. As Armstrong points out, Muslims date their era, not from the year of the birth of the Prophet, but from the year of his migration to Medina.

Muhammad died in June 632 CE, but by then, under the combined influence of the unifying attributes of the Islamic religion and the political and commercial success of the Arabian nations, his religion had become a dominant force in the rise of the Islamic empire. As Armstrong details the subsequent development of modern Islam, this includes the emergence of different sects, such as the Shiite and Sunni, the emergence of the Sharia law, the suppression of woman's rights and the bloodshed and hostility

which is common to the other monotheistic religions which had developed in the Axial period.



The God of the Philosophers

The God of the Philosophers Summary and Analysis

Karen Armstrong explains the development of the philosophic theories about the nature of God by noting that in the Abbasid Empire in the ninth century, Greek science and philosophy exerted a strong influence on Arab culture. There was now an emergence of Muslim studies in astronomy, alchemy, medicine, and mathematics. The Faylasufs developed an advanced notion of God different from that of the traditional Koran. They tried to show that al-Lah was compatible with their rationalist's ideals. Their application of the rational method to the Koran was also influenced by Persian, Indian, and Gnostic teachings. A counter movement came into being when the Shiis declared that God's presence on earth was embodied in some mysterious way by their Imams. These Ismaili philosophers opposed the teachings of the Faylasufs. The Falsafa movement reached its peak with the work of Abu Ali ibn Sina (930 -1037), when the Abbasid caliphate was in decline. At the end of his life ibn Sina became critical of the rational approach to God.

A similar intellectual movement developed among the Jews in the Islamic empire who did not accept the Neoplatonic doctrine of the creation of the world by God from nothing and tried to modify the theory of emanation to allow God a certain degree of spontaneity and free will.

Armstrong describes a separate and distinct development in the Muslim religion when the Sufis claimed that they experienced God, not by a rational or metaphysical manner, but through an intuitive process closer to that of the prophets of old. A distinguished Muslim philosopher, in Cordova, Spain, Abu Walid ibn Ahmad ibn Rushd (1126 - 1198), had an enormous influence on both Jews and Christians and specifically on theologians such as Thomas Aquinas and Albert the Great. During the twelfth century, European scholars had flocked to Spain to study Muslim theology, and Thomas Aquinas made a lasting contribution to Western Christianity by trying to synthesize Augustine and Greek philosophy.

The development of conflicting philosophies of the nature and existence of God took place against the backdrop of the Second Crusade and the rise to prominence of Bernard, the abbot of the Cistercian Abby of Clairvaux in Burgundy, whose influence outshone that of Pope Eugene II and King Louis VII of France. Armstrong notes that these theories and philosophies were not designed to convince unbelievers since there were, at that point in time, no people called atheists. The relevance of these ideas may have appeared insignificant to peoples engaged in the bitter conflict of the crusades but, in any case, they were being rapidly overtaken by the thinking of Mystics.



The God of the Mystics

The God of the Mystics Summary and Analysis

In chapter 7, Karen Armstrong explains that the idea of a personal God was developed by all three of the monotheistic religions as a necessary stage of moral development in enshrining the values of society and thus conformance to its mores. Nevertheless, an inherent danger in a personal God leads adherents of a religion to imbue in the Deity their own prejudices and limitations. The history of the emergence of the Judaic scriptures can be interpreted as the refinement and later abandonment of the tribal and personalized Yahweh, while Christianity attempted to qualify the highly personalized cult of God incarnate by introducing the doctrine of the transpersonal Trinity. Likewise the Muslims experienced problems with the passages in the Koran where God was described as exhibiting human acts such as "hearing" and judging.

All three monotheistic religions were, more or less, forced to develop mystical traditions, which remove their God from the personal human category to transcend the human attributes, which were derived from the personal God. In doing so, they approached the contemplative practices of the Buddhist and Vedic religions. These mystical practices emphasized the internal journey to experience the Deity and preached the principle that God resides in each individual.

In Judaism, mysticism developed in the second and third centuries starting with the Throne Mysticism which was careful to not antagonize the rabbinic tradition but which described a journey to the Throne of God through the mythical realm of seven heavens. The classic texts of this form of Judaic mysticism were written in Babylon in the fifth and sixth centuries and flourished alongside the rabbinic academies until it was incorporated in the new Jewish tradition of Kabbalah in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Kabbalists used the Gnostic and Neoplatonic distinction between the essence of God and the God who is revealed by the reality of creation. The principles of Kabbalism were enunciated in "The Zohar" (The Book of Splendor), a text written in 1275 by the Spanish mystic Moses of Leon.

In the Christian church, Armstrong depicts the divergence between the Eastern and Western churches. In the East the experience of God was characterized as being like sunbeams that can be seen by humans without them observing the sun, the source of the light. In the west the Christian form of mysticism rested not on imagery, but on the silent, inward experience, where the contemplative had to pass beyond language and the conscious mind. The development of a Christian mystic tradition blossomed in the fourteenth century, especially in Northern Europe, with the teachings of Meister Eckhart, Johannes Tauler, Richard Rolle of Hampole, and Dame Julian of Norwich. The teachings of these mystics shocked the religious establishment and were suppressed by Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century, while in the Roman Catholic Church, mystics such as St. Teresa of Avila were threatened by the Inquisition.



In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in many parts of the Muslim Empire, Sufism was transformed from being a minority to that of a dominant tradition. The most famous Sufi order was the Mawlawiyyah, which became known in the West, as "the whirling dervishes." This sect arose as the Muslim Empire began to be overcome by the invading Mongol armies. As Armstrong points out, the adherence to mystic teachings was not without concrete personal danger at the hands of the established religion. An example of this is the martyrdom of the mystic known as al-Hallaj, who was accused of blasphemy and crucified in Iraq in the ninth century.

The same need for the invention of a less personal God and a more mystical one arose in all three monotheistic religions and converged on some of the facets of the Buddhist and Vedic systems. This leads to the conclusion that this need betrays a fundamental and universal attribute for mankind in general.



A God for Reformers

A God for Reformers Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 8, Karen Armstrong describes how the momentous events of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries affected all three major monotheistic religions and how their ideas of God underwent change and new directions.

Armstrong relates how by 1492, the last Muslim stronghold in Spain had fallen to the Christian forces of Ferdinand and Isabella. In other parts of the Muslim Empire, the Mongol invasion led to a resurgence of conservatism as Muslim science declined and which, as some scholars have suggested, marked the beginning of decadence in Islam. Muslim influence, however, increased in scope as the Ottoman Turks gained hold in Asia Minor; the Safavids rose up in Iran, and the Moghul Empire emerged in India. Despite the conservatism occasioned by the rise of the Shariah laws and the suppression of independent reasoning in the Sunni madrasahs, scholars, such as Mulla Sadr (ca 1571 - 1640), taught a philosophy that fused metaphysics and spirituality. In the same spirit of tolerance and acceptance, non-Muslim religions formed an important part of in policies of the Moghul emperor in 1560.

Tolerance of other religions was not evident in Christian Spain. Karen Armstrong describes how in 1492, 150,000 Jews, who refused baptism, were expelled from Spain. This anti-Semitic pogrom spread throughout Europe where Jews were expelled from one city after another, from Cologne to Vienna. The effect on the Jewish people was to evoke a new form of Kabbalism, a spiritual longing for the redemption of Israel as foretold by the ancient prophets. The focal point for the new spirituality was the town of Safed in Galilee which invoked a trend to more mystical forms of religion. The Kabbalists still struggled with the problems of defining the nature of God but moved away from the concept of a separate incomprehensible Godhead to a God who comprised the whole of reality.

In the Western world, as Karen Armstrong points out, the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries saw the development of entirely new cultures stemming from the Italian Renaissance and the beginning of the scientific discoveries. This period of great transition produced a profound change in the way people regarded religion and their understanding of the deity. The medieval forms of religion erupted into fragmented sects and belief systems, led by such reformers as Luther and Calvin. Now Europe split into two warring armies of Protestantism and Catholicism, with the antagonists entrenched in regressive dogmas. The Catholic church distinguished itself when Pope Innocent VIII promulgated a Papal Bull in 1484, which started the awful witch hunt craze that lasted for two hundred years and during which, thousands of innocent people were tortured and executed for beliefs and superstitions which they, either did not hold or could not have understood.



The greatest example of the coming scientific revolution was, perhaps, Galileo's telescope and his profound insight into the meaning of the earth's place in the universe. As Armstrong describes it, this was also symptomatic of the Catholics' repressive regime. Galileo's discoveries were greeted by the Vatican with condemnation by the Inquisition and with his imprisonment.

Armstrong also addresses the developing gulf between new scientific discoveries and the old religious dogmas. She recounts how the term "atheist" became transformed from a vague term of abuse into a new concept: the denial of the existence of God.



Enlightenment

Enlightenment Summary and Analysis

Karen Armstrong begins this chapter with an overview of the effect that the technical and industrial revolution, occurring in the West, had on the beliefs of the three monotheistic religions. By the end of the seventeenth century, there was a widespread belief among most modern societies that humankind could exert control over the natural world and replace the old sanctities with fresh and new ideas. Advances in Western science led to a reexamination of the Christian religion and even to questioning the existence of God. In Europe, scientists such as Blaise Pascal and Renee Descartes, published their own theories as to the meaning and role of God in modern life, while, in England, the physicist Isaac Newton extended his opus magnus "Philosophiae Naturalis Principia" to prove God's existence. The new religion of Deism became known as "The Enlightenment," when Voltaire defined his version of an ideal religion in his "Philosophical Dictionary" in 1764.

The Jews of Europe were also developing new ideas, and Armstrong describes, in detail, the ideas of Baruch Spinoza (1632 - 77), a Dutch Jew, who had become discontented with the ideas in the Torah and joined a group of Gentile freethinkers, which led to his expulsion from the synagogue of Amsterdam. It was a German philosopher, Moses Mendelssohn (1729 - 86), who propounded the liberal ideas of the Enlightenment and paved the way for Judaism to enter the arena of modern Europe. The author includes the great Immanuel Kant in this move towards enlightenment by Western Judaism.

Armstrong next turns to the phenomenon of the so-called "religion of the heart," which emerged contemporaneously with the rationalization of the Enlightenment. When John Wesley sailed to the New World colony of Georgia in 1735, he was greatly impressed by missionaries from a Moravian sect, which preached that religion is merely a matter of the heart. Back in London Wesley became a convert to this religion and preached his new faith to the workers and peasants in the countryside. The principle of "being born again" and the practice of mysticism-for-everyone resulted, occasionally, in violent ecstasies as witnessed in the gatherings of Quakers and Shakers. Armstrong describes a similar wave of religious fervor, which swept through New England in the 1730's and which became known as "The Great Awakening."

A remarkably similar development to the "Great Awakening" in Christianity occurred in Judaism as Karen Armstrong relates. In 1626, a wealthy Sephardic Jew in Smyrna, called Shabbetai Zevi, started a movement in which he declared he was the Messiah and that redemption was at hand. This movement was received ecstatically by Jews all over the world but the Shabbetai cult ended when he was arrested as a rebel in Istanbul in 1666 and imprisoned by the Sultan in Gallipoli. Before his trial, the Sultan gave him the choice of conversion to Islam or death. Shabbetai Zevi chose Islam, was released, and given an imperial pension, to the devastation of his followers.



In the Islamic world, Sufism had become somewhat decadent, and, though the Indian Sufi Shah Wali-Ullah of Delhi tried to unite the Sunnis and Shiis and tried to reform the Sharia, his son would lead a jihad against the British. Armstrong describes how a new conservative Islamic response arose to counter the dominance of the Western culture. In Central Arabia, Muhammed ibn al Wahhab, a jurist from the Najd, converted Muhammed ibn Saud the ruler of the principality. The new sect drove the Ottoman Turks from the Western Province of Hiraz and instituted reforms, which under the label of Wahhabism, remains the dominant Islamic religion in Saudi Arabia to this day.

In Europe, meanwhile, Armstrong points out that science was beginning to impinge on religion, and philosophers like David Hume (1711-1776), began to question the existence and relevance of God.



The Death of God?

The Death of God? Summary and Analysis

In this chapter Karen Armstrong outlines the developments in the nineteenth century which led to questioning of the existence and relevance of God. The scientific work of Charles Darwin and the writings of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud led to the conclusion that the traditional religions were now inadequate. Certainly Darwin's *ORIGIN OF THE SPECIES* seemed to negate the story of the Creation in Genesis. Nietzsche proclaimed that God was dead and taught that the Christian God was absurd and "a crime against life." Sigmund Freud considered belief in a God as an illusion, which people should discard. However, some Christians adapted to Darwin's discoveries and did not consider his theory to lead to preclusion of a deity. In a like manner, Jews and Muslims, not being as prone as Christians to the literal interpretation of the scriptures, were less concerned about the discoveries of the origins of life.

Western secularism and the rising dominance of industrialized European countries had a profound effect on the Muslim religion, however, when Muslims realized that the religion and God of Islam was not able to protect them from subjugation by the Europeans. Now many Muslims concentrated on a return to the historical Koran and to making it more effective. As Armstrong concludes, the instability and lack of self-esteem in the Islamic culture, has resulted in the modern fundamentalism in that culture which prevails in the modern world.

In the world of Judaism, Armstrong describes a similar discontent with the traditional beliefs, which arose after the anti-Semitic pogroms in Russia and Europe. Though, before all that was lost with the rise of Adolph Hitler in Germany, the Jews still believed they were safe from the worst excesses.

Another significant development among Jews was the emergence of Zionism. In 1882, a group of Jews fled from Russia and settled in Palestine. These Zionists were ardent secular socialists, among whom was David Ben-Gurion. Armstrong describes these first Zionists as essentially following a religion without a God. The original intention was not to found a Jewish state but, instead, to provide a spiritual center for the focus of the people of Israel. Later this type of spirituality resulted in the birth of Jewish fundamentalism.

At the end of this chapter, titled with the question of the cessation in the belief in God, Karen Armstrong evokes the horrors of the concentration camp at Auschwitz and says that, today, many Jews, as a result of the Holocaust, no longer believe in a personal God. They reason that, if God is omnipotent he could have prevented the Holocaust, and, if he could not, then he is impotent and useless.



Does God Have a Future?

Does God Have a Future? Summary and Analysis

In the last chapter in the book, Karen Armstrong starts with a pessimistic survey of the modern world as it enters the second millennium. She notes that, in Europe, the churches are emptying and atheism and secular ideas are becoming more and more prevalent. In the current trend towards the rejection of the traditional ideas of God, throughout the three main monotheistic religions, more and more writers and philosophers struggle to develop ideas which might replace the old religions. In a wide-ranging survey of modern writing and philosophies, Karen Armstrong describes and discusses the ideas of approximately twenty authors and provides a suggested reading list of thirty-two books.

Though her survey spans such a large body of work, from Nietzsche to Sartre, from the Logical Positivists to Liberal Protestantism, Armstrong provides no clear-cut solution to the dilemma of replacing the age old traditions of religion and God in all three of the major monotheistic religions. Armstrong asserts that the old tribal God standing in judgment of the individual, is obviously not pertinent nor desirable in modern society. Instead she points to the Islamic movement of the Falsufahs who, in their initial enthusiasm for science, developed a metaphysical view of al-Lah. This Armstrong identifies as a possible direction for a new philosophy for religion and God.

Concomitant with the mystical approach to God, in opposition to the rationalistic and literal interpretation of the sacred scripts, Armstrong advocates the desirability of a compassionate approach to religion and the place an individual occupies in society. She points to the common element of compassion in all the progressive developments in the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic religions and, in the same vein, includes the introduction of the Buddhist worship of the Bodhisattvas. Implied in these modifications in the traditional religions and their concepts of God is the notion that the way forward might be in a unification of the concept of the deity.

Paradoxically, Armstrong identifies strong movements in all three religions to a regressive fundamentalism. Thus, in the West one finds Christian Fundamentalism conjoined with the New Right, in the Moslem world, the growth of the fundamentalism of the Taliban and the existence of terrorist sects such as Al Qaeda, and, in the Jewish world, the aggressive expansion of the Jewish settlers which obstructs a solution to the Palestine question. Karen Armstrong suggests that all three of these movements are, in fact, a retreat from God.

Karen Armstrong passionately believes that human beings have, in the 4000 years of the quest delineated in her book, always sought an answer to the questions raised by religion and the idea of God. There has always been a thirst to fill the emptiness when God is excluded, so that the answer to the question of God's future is not in doubt. The

question, which is not answered, is the form that this inherent trait of humankind will take.



Characters

Abraham

Abraham is reputed to have been one of the chieftains of the people wandering through Mesopotamia in the Tigris Euphrates valley at the end of the third millennium BCE. These people spoke West Semitic tongues, among which was Hebrew and were culturally more developed than the regular desert nomads like the Bedouins. Abraham, himself, according to the Book of Genesis in the Old Testament Bible, is described as having served the King of Sodom as a mercenary. When his wife Sarah died, Abraham bought land in Hebron, which is now part of the West Bank.

Later a second wave of immigration from Mesopotamia was linked with Abraham's grandson Jacob and led to settlement in the town of Nablus. Jacob's sons became the ancestors of the twelve tribes of Israel, and they moved to Egypt during a drastic drought in Canaan. When these descendants of Abraham returned to Canaan from Egypt, they told how they had been enslaved by the Egyptians. Their leader was a man called Moses, whose God called Yahweh, had delivered them from the Egyptian enslavement.

It is thought likely by modern scholars that Abraham worshiped El, the High God of Canaan, and the amalgam of different ethnic groups which led to the emergence of the Hebrew nation, also included separate and distinct gods and religious beliefs. Nevertheless, Abraham is described as being promised by the God of the Bible that he would become the father of many nations despite the fact that his wife Sarah was beyond the childbearing age. Then surprisingly Abraham and Sarah had a son called Isaac only to have God demand Abraham sacrifice this first born son to him. This is regarded by many scholars as being a depiction of the prevalent practice of human sacrifice among the peoples of that era. As Abraham was about to kill his son, God relented, and having proved his fidelity, Abraham, did, indeed become the father of a mighty nation.

Moses

Moses was the leader of the descendants of Abraham who had been enslaved by the Egyptians. Moses under the protection of his God, whom his people called Yahweh, led his people to the land of Canaan where they settled with the other Hebrew people. In the stories of the Bible, Moses is portrayed as being the principal intermediary between Yahweh and the ordinary people. The Israelites did not, at first, worship Yahweh, the God of Sinai as the only true God, instead they also worshiped the god Baal, who ensured success of their crops. When Moses and the Israelites came to Mount Sinai, he went alone up the mountain and received the tablets of the Law, and he and his people made a covenant with Yahweh to worship him alone. There are many tales of Moses in the Old Testament, and he is portrayed as a prophet and the primary interface between



Yahweh and his people. In these stories the identity of the God of Abraham and the God of Moses become fused together. Yahweh, the God who led the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt occupied the place of the God of War and supplanted the pagan tribal gods to promulgate the laws, which came to govern the lives of the Hebrew nation.

Jesus of Nazareth

Jesus of Nazareth was the son of a local carpenter in Nazareth. He led a perfectly normal life until the age of thirty when he began to preach to his fellow townsmen. Jesus may have been a disciple of the wandering ascetic, John the Baptist. John preached that the population should accept the Essene rite of purification by baptism in the waters of the River Jordan and Jesus did make the long trek to Judea to be baptized by John, who is reputed to have recognized him as the Messiah. Then Jesus traveled through the towns and villages of Galilee and preached that the Kingdom of God had arrived.

There is only a minimal factual record of Jesus' life or his sermons, though, after his death, a plethora of material has been assigned to him. The earliest records are found in the Gospel of St. Mark, which was written in CE70, some forty years after Jesus' death. Suffice it to say, Jesus may have been like many of the other religious figures in Galilee at that time, preachers, mendicants, and faith healers. He may have been a Pharisee as his teachings were in conformance with the observances of the Torah and included the abjuration of charity and loving-kindness. The gospels of Matthew, Luke, and Paul widely disagree on what exactly were the doctrines that Jesus preached, but during his life many Jews in Palestine did indeed believe he was the Messiah. Then, three years after he had started his proselytizing, he rode into Jerusalem to be hailed as the Son of David and three days later was crucified by the Romans.

His followers were distraught by his death in the manner of a common criminal, and immediately rumors started that he had risen from the dead. In one incident five hundred people claimed to have seen him at the same time and in the same place. In subsequent years a huge following emerged of people who believed that Jesus was divine and was the Son of God. However it took four centuries for the belief in his Incarnation to be codified in Christian dogma and by then Christianity had become one of the major monotheistic religions in the world.

St. Paul

St Paul was the earliest Christian writer and he left a large number of letters to his disciples in various parts of the Eastern Mediterranean. Paul is credited with founding the modern Christian church because he believed the powers of God should be made available to gentiles as well as orthodox Jews. He founded congregations in what are now Turkey, Macedonia, and Greece. Most of his followers were Jews from the diaspora or those who believed in Judaism but not in the strict formal dogmas of Orthodox Judaism.



In the course of Paul's letters to his disciples, the doctrine of the divinity of Jesus was never concretely addressed and Paul used the expression "Son of God" in its Jewish sense indicating that he possessed the powers and spirit of God.

In the first century, Paul and his followers were expelled from the Jewish synagogues in which they had been worshiping alongside orthodox Jews. This came about because they were not following the strict tenets of the Torah and had become embroiled in passionate and acrimonious disputes with the orthodox Jews. At this point the New Judaism became the new religion of Christianity.

Muhammad ibn Abdullah

Muhammad ibn Abdullah is known as The Prophet, throughout the Muslim world. Muhammad was an Arab merchant living in the city of Mecca in Hiraz the western province of what is now known as Saudi Arabia in the year 610 CE. He was a member of the Quraysh tribe and would take his family to mount Hira, just outside the city, for his annual visit to pray to the High God of the Arabs, during the month of Ramadan.

Muhammad was aware that the Quraysh had become very successful in trade based on the city of Mecca and the old tribal values were being subsumed by rampant capitalism. He felt that his own clan, the Hashim, would be destroyed in an implosion of politics, greed, and internecine strife. On the seventeenth night of Ramadan, Muhammad experienced a religious epiphany, which he described as being in the form of an angel who had appeared and ordered him to "Recite." When Muhammad demurred the angel enveloped him in an overpowering embrace, squeezing the life out of him until he finally acquiesced and then, miraculously, words of a new scripture came pouring from his mouth in what would be later called the Qur'an, or the Recitation.

With the encouragement of his wife, Khadija, and her Christian cousin, Muhammad was reassured that he had experienced a divine revelation and he began to preach to the Quraysh people in their own language. As the Koran was gradually revealed, it became clear that it was not a new universal religion that was being advocated but a return to the values of the traditional religion. Gradually, however, the teachings of Muhammad included various rituals and the acknowledgment of a single deity called al-Lah. In the first years of his ministry, Muhammad attracted thousands of disciples from the younger generation and the underprivileged groups, while the wealthier establishment held back, accepting the status quo. However, when Muhammad started to insist that his followers cease worshiping the old pagan gods, there was a break with the more affluent Qurayshis.

Almost overnight Muhammad lost the majority of his disciples and he and his remaining followers became a despised and persecuted religious minority. To avoid the continuous persecution, Muhammad accepted the invitation to go and live in Yathrib or Medina, so in 622 CE, he and about seventy families migrated to Yathrib. In Yathrib, or Medina, Muhammad is influenced by the Jews who lived there and adopted some aspects of Judaism into his new religion. For the ten years between his migration to Medina and



his death in 632, Muhammad had to struggle against fierce opposition in Mecca and Medina, but by the time of his death he had laid the foundations of a monotheistic religion, which, in time, became equal to the other universal religions in the world.

Siddhartha Gautama

Siddhartha Gautama lived in Kapilavashtu, 100 miles north of Benares, in what is now known as India. In 538 BCE, appalled by the suffering and deprivations he witnessed around him, he left his beautiful wife and son, abandoned the luxurious life he had been living, and became a mendicant ascetic. For six years he studied under various Hindu gurus but made no progress towards the enlightenment he sought. Then one night he entered a trance and experienced an enlightenment. For the next forty-five years Gautama journeyed throughout India, preaching his message that right living, Dharma, was the only recourse to free an individual from pain. In doing this Gautama became the Buddha, the Enlightened One.

After his death at the end of the sixth century BCE, statues of the Buddha began to appear in northwest India, namely at Gandhara and Marthura, and this practice spread throughout the world where the Buddha's teachings were followed.

Emperor Constantine

Emperor Constantine was an Emperor of Rome who became a Christian and, after the battle of Milvian Bridge in 312, legalized Christianity, which led to it becoming the official state religion of the Roman Empire.

Abu Walid ibn Ahmad ibn Rushd

Abu Walid ibn Ahmad ibn Rushd (1126 - 1198) was a distinguished Muslim scholar in Cordova, Spain in the twelfth century. He had an enormous influence on both Jews and Christians and specifically on theologians such as Thomas Aquinas and Albert the Great.

Meister Eckhart

Meister Eckhart was a leading Christian mystic in fourteenth-century Germany, who shocked the Catholic bishops with his teaching of the mystical aspects of Christianity.

Al-Hallaj

Al-Hallaj was a Sufi mystic in Iraq in the ninth century who was put to death by crucifixion for his beliefs.



Luther

Martin Luther (1483-1546) was a monk in the Catholic Church, from which he separated to lead a separate and reformatory church in 1520.

Calvin

John Calvin (1500-1564) was another major figure in the Reformation movement at the end of the sixteenth century. His Swiss Reformation became an international religion and his ideas inspired the Puritan revolution in England and the colonization of New England in the 1620s.

Pope Innocent VIII

Pope Innocent VIII was the Catholic pope who promulgated a Papal Bull in 1484, which started the witch hunt hysteria in Europe, during which, during the next two hundred years, thousands of people were tortured and executed.

Galileo

Galileo Galilei was a mathematician in Pisa in 1613. His invention of the telescope revolutionized the science of astronomy. He was forced to retract his scientific results by the Inquisition and placed under house arrest.

Pascal

Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) was a French physicist, mathematician and theologian and one of the first people of the Catholic faith who took the concept of atheism seriously and concluded that belief in God could only be a matter of personal faith.

Descartes

Renee Descartes (1596-1650) was a French mathematician who invented the Cartesian method in an attempt to use mathematics and logic to prove the existence of God.

Newton

Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1727) was an English physicist who published his work, titled THE PRINCIPLES OF NATURAL PHILOSOPHY in 1687, describing the notion of gravity among other principles. He believed in the concept of a divine "Mechanick."



Wesley

John Wesley (1703-1791) was the first to preach the religion of "born again" Christianity.

Darwin

Charles Darwin published "THE ORIGIN OF THE SPECIES" in 1859, in which his revolutionary hypothesis of evolution seemed to contradict the biblical account of the Creation described in the book of Genesis.

Ben Gurion

David Ben Gurion (1886 - 1973) was an ardent young Jewish socialist who went to Palestine to create a model society, which would herald the new millennium.

Nietzsche

Friedrich Nietzsche was a radical theologian and writer who, in 1882, proclaimed the death of God.



Objects/Places

Torah

The Torah is the sacred book of the Jewish Faith

Koran

The Koran - The Recital, is the sacred book of sayings of the Prophet Muhammad

Old Testament Bible

The Old Testament Bible is the book forming the history and teachings of the Jews before the advent of Jesus Christ

New Testament Bible

The New Testaments are the collection of gospels according to disciples of Jesus, Mathew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Temple of Judah

The ancient temple of Judah was the sacred place of worship of the Jews.

Kabbah

The Kabbah is the sacred rock at Mecca in Saudi Arabia. It has been an object of worship since before and after the rise of the Muslim faith.

Deities

Yahweh

Yahweh was the name of God in the first Judaic religions.

Messiah

The Messiah was the return of God, predicted by the Jews, before and after the coming of Jesus Christ. Jesus' followers believed him to be the Messiah.



Trinity

The Trinity is the tripartite Christian Godhead—the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Al_Lah

Al-Lah is the name of the High God of the Arab world. Muhammad preached that Al-Lah was to be worshiped as the only God.

Buddha

Buddha means the Enlightened One. Buddha is the object of worship of followers of Buddha. The first Buddha was Siddhartha Gautama.

Sharia

The Sharia is the Muslim system of law and punishment.

Inquisition

The Inquisition was the organization in the Catholic Church, which carried out investigation, trial, and punishment on ecclesiastical matters.

Madrasahs

Madrasahs are the Muslim schools, which carry out the education of young people in the teachings of the Koran.

Papal Bull

A Papal Bull is a proclamation of dogma or ecclesiastical law made by a Catholic Pope.

The Zohar

The Zohar titled "THE BOOK OF SPLENDOR," is the most influential Kabbalistic text. It was written in about 1275 by a Spanish Mystic.

The Holocaust

The Holocaust is the name of the program in Nazi Germany during World War II, which involved the systematic execution of more than six million Jews and three million non-Jews.



Tigris-Euphrates River System

The Tigris-Euphrates Rivers join together to form a complex river system in what is now Iraq and what was known as Mesopotamia.

Canaan

Canaan was the site of the settlement of the early Hebrew peoples who went on to form the twelve tribes of Israel

Babylon

Babylon was the capital of the Babylonian Empire. It is now the city of Baghdad.

Eastern Mediterranean

The Eastern Mediterranean was the site of most Jewish settlements in 45 to 64 CE.

Mecca

Mecca is the city in Western Saudi Arabia, which was the home of the Quraysh people, where the Prophet Muhammad first preached and is still, to this day, the most sacred site of all Islam.

Medina (Yathrib)

Medina is the second most sacred site in the Moslem world. It was where the Prophet fled after he and his followers were coerced out of Mecca in 620.

Cordova, Spain

Cordova is a city in Spain, which marks the last site of the Islamic occupation of Europe.

Vatican

The Vatican is the location of the headquarters of the Roman Catholic Church. It is both a center of worship and an independent state within the country of Italy.

Sinai

Sinai is the desert area to the east of Egypt and beyond the Sea of Reeds where the Israelites fled from their enslavement by the Egyptians.



Themes

Fundamentalism

In the first chapter of her book "A HISTORY OF GOD..." Karen Armstrong asserts that creating gods is something that human beings have always done. Certainly the historical record of the human species shows that images and statues of supreme beings have existed from even before the advent of writing. The need to externalize a force or being responsible, somehow, for the world in which mankind exists, is apparent in all ages and in all peoples throughout the world. This is particularly so when the realities of the sight of the earth's planetary neighbors and star, the sun, are taken into account. It would seem that there is an innate, fundamental characteristic of the human race to invent gods to account for these phenomenon. Whether this is an attribute of the human gene, as some writers have maintained, or, as Armstrong notes, "human beings cannot endure emptiness and desolation; they will fill the vacuum by creating a new focus of meaning," the fact remains that this behavior is a fundamental characteristic of human nature and distinct from the social organizations of official religions.

The term "fundamentalism" is also used to describe the current trend, in all three of the monotheistic religions, to revert to an earlier, more primitive form of belief, which embodies earlier stages of religious evolution occurring after the old tribal gods had consolidated into a strict, authoritarian version of God. This fundamentalism is, in fact, simply a regressive trend, in opposition to the advance of religious thought and belief towards a more liberal and less repressive form.

It is important to realize that the former fundamentalism is a genuine universal attribute of humankind, whilst, the latter fundamentalism usurps the term and represents the resistance to change and advancement exhibited by self interested and regressive groups.

Mysticism

Mysticism, or the experiencing of the godhead directly by an individual embarking on the "internal journey," has been a common but resisted idea in all three monotheistic religions. In the Western churches, mysticism was never part of the main stream of religious development and was marginalized and outlawed. It would seem that the ability of an individual to communicate directly with the Supreme Being, without going through the intermediation of priests and prophets, represents the danger of a loss of control on the part of these self-elevated officials.

Armstrong devotes a whole chapter to the God of the Mystics and describes the wide-ranging occurrence of mystical practices and experiences. Essentially mysticism is characterized by non-verbal activity. As Armstrong notes, language itself can be a limiting faculty, and mysticism in the modern world is associated with sub



consciousness as Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung demonstrated with their work. Likewise the incorporation of art in religion caters to a deep-seated desire for nonverbal aspects of prayer and religious rituals. This is particularly so in the use of music in the Christian religion and the use of icons in the ancient Greek and Eastern Orthodox religions. Muslims are forbidden to depict the human form in their mosques but the written Koran, accompanied by elegant geometric patterns and the graceful linear forms of the words of the Muslim sacred texts, are obviously a form of calligraphic art.

The practices and procedures used by people attempting to undergo a mystical experience incorporate common features throughout the different ages and different religions. Thus, Diodochus, the fifth-century bishop of Photice, prescribed methods involving breathing and certain sedentary postures. This is remarkably similar to the techniques of Buddhists and other oriental religions. Again, it is not difficult to guess the physical effect of the gyrations of the whirling Sufis, especially when accompanied by fasting. This development of the ability to experience a God intrinsically associated with the inner self appears to be the antithesis of the establishment of a social order based on conformance to a common belief system. However, in the trend away from formal religions, based on outdated, controlling deities, it is most likely that an increasing reliance on mystical forms and practices will be a major component in the future evolution of religion.

Compassion

Compassion or the "love of they neighbor like oneself" is a recurring theme in Christianity. "Do unto others as thou wouldst have done to oneself" is often quoted as the kernel of all teachings of Jesus. In the same way, the underlying principle of Muslim tenets is the overriding desire for social justice among all people. It is not surprising, therefore, that Armstrong identifies compassion as the major ideal for an emerging religion. It is the trend away from the cruel and tyrannical Gods of the ancient religions that gives hope for mankind.

Paradoxically, it is the inability of monotheistic religions to reconcile an omnipotent and merciful God with the human experience of suffering, illness and horrors such as the twentieth-century Holocaust, that leads to theological difficulties in all three religions. It is precisely the absence of compassion in the perceived actions of the deity, which point to inadequacies in the Western monotheistic religions. A comparison between the Buddhist teachings of the sacredness of all living creatures with the sometimes cruel and excessively repressive dogmas of the monotheistic religions, leads to the conclusion that compassion must be the direction of evolution of religions if they are to satisfy mankind's desire for comprehension of the meaning of life and his place in the world.

Style

Perspective

Karen Armstrong spent the early part of her life as a novitiate in a Catholic Convent. Disillusioned with her religious experience, she left and entered the secular life. This experience has not affected her perspective in writing about the three monotheistic of the Western world. Instead it forms a strong basis for her later studies of Muslim and Judaic religions.

A History of God is admittedly confined to the Judaic, Christian, and Muslim religions, though inevitably Armstrong makes some important comparisons with Buddhist and Vedic religions. Buddhism, is treated in some considerable detail. It would be difficult to justify the increased scope of the book beyond practical limits but the religious beliefs of the Egyptian dynasties which existed in the period of the emergence of the Hebrew nations and the beginning of the Judaic religion, are not addressed.

The History of God, as presented by Armstrong, is a more or less continuous development from Judaic religion, through the Christian era and, subsequently, through the emergence of the Muslim religion in 620 CE. Confining the subject to this single arena of religious evolution excludes analysis of other religious belief systems, which preexisted and coexisted in Europe and the Middle East. Inclusion of these other religions would provide a wider scope and help delineate the universal perspective of the emergence of the monotheistic religions.

The last two chapters of the book, which deal with the death and future of God, represent the most intriguing aspects of the book. Despite the thorough and scholarly treatment of the subject, no definite conclusion emerges as to the future direction of the evolution of religion and the concept of God. Except for the assertion that there is a basic innate need for the idea of God and, probably, the concomitant necessity for social organizations embodying religions, there is not much analysis as to the future of mankind's desire to find meaning and purpose in life.

Tone

Given the history of hostility and outright warfare between societies in the three main monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Muslimism, from the Crusades through the medieval European anti-Semitic pogroms and the Israel and Palestinian conflict, it is remarkable that Karen Armstrong is able to maintain an even handed, professorial tone throughout the book. This is not to say that she condones the reprehensible actions and teachings of various regressive, fanatical groups, which unfortunately exist in all the main religious groups, but she does so in a meticulous and thoroughly academic manner. Everything in the text is profusely referenced, and there is a copious reading list at the end of the book.



In terms of respecting the different cultures with which she is dealing, Armstrong is careful to consistently apply the "Before Common Era" BCE and "After Common Era" CE designations to all dates, thereby avoiding the trap of referring all dates to before and after the birth of Christ and plunging the book into the realm of a predominantly Western Christian context. The temptation to refer dates of Muslim events to the Islamic calendar, however, is not taken up. The fact that the Muslim calendar is based on the year of the Prophet's journey to Medina and not the Prophet's birth date is duly noted but given that the Muslim calendar is not only displaced by a constant number of years but is also a lunar calendar, using this calendar would place an undue burden on non-Muslim readers.

One minor detail is the widely used term "pagan" to describe the religions, gods, and rituals, which were displaced by the major monotheistic religions. This, while accurate, denotes a slightly disparaging air to what might, more appropriately be described as polytheistic.

Structure

The main part of the book is divided into eleven named chapters. The chapter titles describe, not only the major theme of each chapter, but also reflect the logical progression of the book. Chapters 10 and 11 have the titles "The Death of God" and "Does God have a Future," which inevitably lead a reader to intense interest and a desire to read the book.

The book is preceded by a suite of nine maps of the Middle East and Western Europe at various times in the periods dealt with in the text. These maps are an important adjunct to the text but are not specifically referred to in the text and appear to be in the form of an addendum rather than an integral part of the text.

The Introduction provides an interesting but not too intrusive account of the author's background and professional history. At the end of the book are a Glossary, Notes, Suggestions for Further Reading and an Index. All these extra sections provide meticulous and professional sources and references to the material on which the book is founded and are consistent reminders of the author's academic credentials.

Quotes

"This is a brutal, partial and murderous god: a god of war who would be known as Yahweh Sabaoth, the God of Armies. He is passionately partisan, has little compassion for anyone but his own favorites and is simply a tribal deity." Chapter 1 In the Beginning, p 19.

"When they attributed their own human feelings and experiences to Yahweh, the prophets were in an important sense creating a god in their own image. Isaiah, a member of the royal family, had seen Yahweh as a king. Amos had ascribed his own empathy with the suffering poor to Yahweh; Hosea saw Yahweh as a jilted husband, who still continued to feel a yearning tenderness for his wife. All religion must begin with some anthropomorphism." Chapter 2 One God, p 48.

"The Gospels tell us that God had given Jesus certain divine 'powers', however, which enabled him, mere mortal though he was, to perform the God-like tasks of healing the sick and forgiving sins. When people saw Jesus in action, therefore, they had a living, breathing image of what God was like." Chapter 3 A Light to the Gentiles, p 82.

"The Gnostics showed that many of the new converts to Christianity were not satisfied with the traditional idea of God which they had inherited from Judaism. They did not experience the world as 'good,' the work of a benevolent deity." Chapter 3 A Light to the Gentiles, p 96.

"When the bishops gathered at Nicaea on May 20, 325, to resolve the crisis, very few would have shared Athanasius's view of Christ. Most held a position midway between Athanasius and Arius. Nevertheless Athanasius managed to impose his theology on the delegates and, with the emperor breathing down their necks, only Arius and two of his brave companions refused to sign his Creed." Chapter 4 Trinity the Christian God, p 110.

"Augustine agreed; 'What is the difference,' he wrote to a friend, 'whether it is in a wife or a mother, it is still Eve the temptress that we must beware of in any woman.' "
Chapter 4 Trinity the Christian God, p 124.

"When I heard the Koran, my heart was softened and I wept and Islam entered into me.' It was the Koran which prevented God from being a mighty reality 'out there' and brought him into the mind, heart and being of each believer." Chapter 5 Unity: the God of Islam, p147.

"The Koran strictly forbade the killing of female children and rebuked Arabs for their dismay when a girl was born. It also gave women legal rights of inheritance and divorce; most Western women had nothing comparable until the nineteenth century." Chapter 5 Unity: the God of Islam, p 157 - 158.



"Mystical religion is more immediate and tends to be more help in time of trouble than a predominantly cerebral faith. The disciplines of mysticism help the adept to return to the One, the primordial beginning, and to cultivate a constant sense of presence." Chapter 7 The God of Mystics, p 212.

"The mystical experience of God has certain characteristics that are common to all faiths. It is a subjective experience that involves an interior journey, not a perception of an objective fact outside the self; it is undertaken through the image-making part of the mind - often called the imagination - rather than through the more cerebral, logical faculty." Chapter 7 The God of Mystics, p 219

"All the major religious traditions claim that the acid test of any spirituality is the degree to which it has been integrated into daily life. As the Buddha said, after enlightenment one should 'return to the market place' and practice compassion for all living things. A sense of peace, serenity and loving-kindness are the hallmarks of true religious insight." Chapter 8 The God for Reformers, p 270.

"One fact emerges, however, that is important to our story: the Roman Catholic Church did not condemn the heliocentric theory because it endangered belief in God the Creator but because it contradicted the word of God in scripture." Chapter 8 A God for Reformers, p 289.

"Like Augustine, some twelve centuries earlier, Descartes found evidence of God in human consciousness: even doubt proved the existence of the doubter. We cannot be certain of anything in the external world, but we can be certain of our own inner experience." Chapter 9 Enlightenment, p 300.

"In the West, however, Christian theologians had got into the habit of talking about God as though he really was one of the things that existed. They had seized upon the new science to prove the objective reality of God as though he could be tested and analyzed like anything else. Diderot, Holbach and Laplace had turned this attempt on its head and come to the same conclusion as the more extreme mystics: there was nothing out there. It was not long before other scientists and philosophers triumphantly declared that God was dead." Chapter 9 Enlightenment, p 345.

"When the supercilious bystanders asked where he imagined God had gone - had he runaway, perhaps, or migrated? - the madman glared at them. 'Where has God gone, 'he called out?' he called out. 'I mean to tell you. We have killed him, - you and I! We are all his murderers!'" Chapter 10 The Death of God?, p 356.

"If this God is omnipotent, he could have prevented the Holocaust. If he was unable to stop it, he is impotent and useless; if he could have stopped it and chose not to, he is a monster. Jews are not the only people who believe that the Holocaust put an end to conventional theology." Chapter 10 The Death of God? , p 376.

"Human beings cannot endure emptiness and desolation; they will fill the vacuum by creating a new focus on meaning. The idols of fundamentalism are not good substitutes for God; if we are to create a vibrant new faith for the twenty-first century, we should,

perhaps, ponder the history of God for some lessons and warnings." Chapter 11 Does God have a Future? , p 399.



Topics for Discussion

Discuss the foundation of the Israelite nation. Describe the different peoples and name their leaders, who came together in the land of Canaan starting in about 2000 BCE. Where had they come from, who did they become, and who was their God?

In the fourth century BCE, Greeks under Alexander of Macedonia, began to colonize Asia and Africa and the Jews of Palestine became surrounded by Greek culture, whose influence had certain effects on their religion and their ideas of God. Is this when Yahweh evolved from a despotic tribal god to a more compassionate being? Discuss the influence of Greek culture on the Jewish religion in the fourth century BCE.

What does the term "Common Era" mean and what is the difference in the designation, in calendar years, between BC and BCE? When do Muslims begin counting years in their calendar and what is the event which marks the beginning of the Muslim calendar? If Christians start their calendars at the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, why do the Jews not start counting their years from the beginning of Genesis? Discuss calendar dates and the significance for different religions.

According to Karen Armstrong who quotes from the Gospel of St. Mark, Jesus of Nazareth never did specifically claim to be God and early Christians prayed in the temple alongside other Jews. Who was the main founder of the separate cult of Jesus and when and how did the concept of the divinity of Jesus emerge? Discuss the transformation of Jesus of Nazareth to Jesus Christ, Son of God.

In 325 CE, the Roman emperor Constantine called a meeting of all Christian bishops at Nicaea to resolve the crisis of the doctrine of the divinity of Jesus. From this meeting came the Nicene Creed, still used today, by the Roman Catholic Church as a core doctrine. Discuss the validity of using political committees as a means to determine divine revelation.

When the Prophet Muhammad started preaching, the emancipation of women was a very important part of his message, yet in today's world, Islam is regarded as being a misogynistic culture. What happened to the original ideas of the Koran as preached by the Prophet? Discuss the role of the "hadith" in the development and modification of the original teachings in the Koran.

When Galileo invented the telescope in 1613, and announced that the earth rotated around the sun, he was forced to recant his ideas and was placed under house arrest. Why did not the Catholic Church act in the same fashion when Darwin published his book "THE ORIGIN OF THE SPECIES" in 1859? Discuss the role of modern science in religion. Are the two belief systems mutually exclusive?

In the first chapter of her book, Karen Armstrong quotes Father Wilhelm Schmidt, who wrote in 1912, that "human beings created a God who was the First Cause of All Things and Ruler of Heaven and Earth." Later, in chapter 10, Armstrong states "Throughout



history people have discarded a conception of God when it no longer works for them." Does this mean that the future of God is assured by the fundamental character of human nature? Discuss "God's Future."