

HISTORY OF GOD REVISITED

Shirley Kinney
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Opening quotes:

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Mankind has forever struggled with the concept of where he came from, what's it all about, why do bad things happen to good people? and so on and so on. We have, for the most part, come to place the "blame" on a god. God created us. God has a special purpose for us. God will take care of us. God can punish us if he feels like it. God knows all, sees all, and is all.

This is an attempt by Carl Sagan, in Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors, to explain why we have these feelings.

"We humans are like a newborn baby left on a doorstep, with no note explaining who it is, where it came from, what hereditary cargo of attributes and disabilities it might be carrying, or who its antecedents might be. We long to see the orphan's file. Repeatedly, in many cultures, we invented reassuring fantasies about our parents—about how much they loved us, about how heroic and larger than life they were. As orphans do, we sometimes blamed ourselves for having been abandoned. It must have been our fault. We were too sinful, perhaps, or morally incorrigible. Insecure, we clung to these stories, imposing the strictest penalties on any who dared to doubt them. It was better than nothing, better than admitting our ignorance of our own origins, better than acknowledging that we had been left naked and helpless, a foundling on a doorstep."

A few weeks ago, Bob Weekley gave a talk from this pulpit, based largely around some of the ideas in A History of God. It was a good talk. He made me want to read the book. So, I begged, and he let me borrow it.

I now must report to all of you something I learned that certainly surprised me and may shock those of you who are purists, as I am. What I found is that—Bob Weekley writes in his books. It's true. He underlines. He double underlines. He arrows. And he occasionally exclamation points.

I myself do not ever ever write in a book. Oh, back in my college days, I admit I might have used colored hi-lighters in my textbooks, but that was more a question of coordinating yellows and pinks and blues. It didn't really relate to the words or ideas I chose to underline.

I have a high regard for Bob's thinking and analyzing processes, so instead of disregarding his marks in the book, I paid particular attention to them.

I tend to read too fast and miss things a more careful reader like Bob wouldn't. So, when I would come to one of Bob's underlined passages, I would slow down or re-read it, and think, "Oh, I get it now. That's important to remember."

And for that assistance, Bob, I thank you.

Then there were the times when I'd slow down and examine his underlined passage and think, "What the devil did he underline that for?" At times I'd figure it out, but, I must confess, at times the reason for his marks went right over my head.

And there were certainly times when I'd come across a marvelous, enlightening passage, to me anyway, and there wasn't a line, not even a smudge, on the page. I'd think to myself, "Wow, how could he have missed this?"

But, for today, let us forgive Bob his underlining transgressions. I have more important fish to fry here.

What I'd like to share with you today are some of the thoughts in this wonderful book that Bob didn't cover, and some thoughts that both he and I would underline, if I actually stooped to do such a thing.

To understand the different focus Bob and I bring to this book, let me tell you a story that Ms. Armstrong tells about in her book.

About the time of the writing of the Old Testament, a group of men wished to learn all about what past philosophers and religious thinkers had written. This was not something new, certainly. But how they went about it was.

The traditional school for many years encouraged its students to read these same books that this new group wished to read, but the order in which the traditional school read was rigorously regulated. First you read Book A, then you read Book B, then you read Book C. And, if Book B was being read by someone else, you didn't skip to Book C, you just waited your turn. Not knowing the importance of that order of reading, the new group read the books in the order each man desired.

And a result of this change, the ancient wisdom and learning gained unique and brand new perspectives. The emphases shifted. Priorities shifted. Understandings shifted.

And so, Bob Weekley and I have brought to Karen Armstrong's book our own unique order of past readings, and that has, no doubt, affected how we add her knowledge to our

own thinking. And, so you will read this book and find different areas that impact your thinking.

There's another reason I'd encourage you to read this book. I can best illustrate it by telling you of my ESP kind of experience with the Knights Templar...

The book, for those of you who forgot or who weren't here to hear Bob's talk, rather thoroughly goes over the history of the three major monotheistic religions today—Jewish, Christian, and Moslem. She traces God tracks in these religions. (Don't tell Tom, he's still looking for those tracks.)

She gives a wonderful overview of the three religions and traces the transitions from pagan to modern day religious movements, and discusses in some detail how each religion took from its past to create its own dogma and creeds. And how each religion changed to become a new religion.

And for that overview alone, I would heartily recommend the book.

But, today I would like to talk about a few somewhat isolated ideas Ms. Armstrong discusses in her book that struck me as memorable.

To give you a little background...the author is Karen Armstrong, an English woman who was a Roman Catholic nun for seven years, going into the convent when she was only seventeen years old. Then she became disenchanted with the Christian church and left to study in depth religious thought of Judaism and Islam. She claims to have lost her belief in the existence of a God, and this is reflected in her writing.

Here are some concepts of Ms. Armstrong that I grabbed onto and mentally underlined.

Humans, apparently, have seldom been long satisfied with their religions. Early pagans worshipped the god that worked for them. And switched when their god appeared ineffective. To another god.

Monotheists finally settled on A god. But, they didn't say, "There, that's done. God exists. Period. That's figured out. Let's follow the rituals and dogma and worry about the weather now or about whether these shoes make my feet look too big."

Once monotheists decided on a god, then they began worrying about what's god like?

How'd god make the world?

How long did it take?

And then later, are we sure there is a god?

How can I be really sure?

Apparently, according to Karen Armstrong, humans have always felt compelled to tackle these issues, even though there is not ever going to be proof that any answers they devise are the correct ones. Still, we keep banging our heads on the same old walls.

All of us, I'm fairly certain, have searched for god. Does god exist? How do I define god? How can I experience god? For many Unitarians, we've come to the conclusion that there probably is no god and we are indeed all alone.

Karen Armstrong explains in some depth the approaches of these three major monotheistic religions in answering these questions.—Does God exist? How do I define God?

Many years ago, I tried to find my solutions by going back to the first Christian writers—writers that didn't make the cut when the Bible was finally published. I figured that they'd be the ones closest to knowing what Jesus really was thinking and how his thinking developed into his sense of oneness with God. I picked Christianity because it was a religion I could most easily understand.

Well, that approach didn't help me.

As Ann Kelsey pointed out a couple of weeks ago, we know for certain only about twelve words that Jesus really truly spoke and which are recorded in the Bible. Everything beyond that is pure speculation and wishful thinking.

According to Karen Armstrong, people back in Bible-writing times were also doing their own delving into their ancestors' thinking for the very same reasons as I was. People at the time of the Bible were saying, "Let's get back to the beginnings to find God."

And before that, people at the time of Abraham were saying, "Let's get back to the beginnings to find God."

Probably some Cro-Magnon man said, "Let's go back to the beginning to find God."

Christians at the time of the Bible writings were so incredibly confused about the definition of God and how to think about God that they said, "God is so impossible to think about, so great a concept to wrap our puny little human minds around, that the best we can do is to describe God as being made up of three sorts of qualities, none of which singly and by itself IS God, and the three together don't even begin to describe God, but that's about the closes mankind can come to it."

The fact that God could be three beings at once is a paradox, a mystery the early church recognized as important, thus showing to believers that God is unknowable--never to be defined.

The same approach of God's unknowable, don't even ask, nature was followed by the Islam faith and the Jewish faith.

Western Christianity later got very literal and said each of these three facets of the unknowable god WAS god—father, son, and holy ghost.

Humans, being what they are, and particularly the early Muslims, with their strong knowledge of science, decided about 300 CE that mysteries were meant to be solved. We must be able to prove logically, once and for all time, that god exists and to prove what God is.

So, philosophers and scientists, particularly the Muslims, began a search to define God. Surely, if mankind can dissect and bisect and analyze all matter, then surely they could also analyze god using logic and scientific thought.

Well, that didn't work, because they kept getting caught up in the sacred words of the Koran or of the Bible or of the Torah. And those sacred words that had been meant to be understood symbolically got in the way of literal dissection and produced unsolvable dilemmas.

Ms. Armstrong argues that there is a danger in defining God in precise scientific terms in that it then becomes all too easy for man to ascribe to God, man's own hates and prejudices, and that justifies man's own negative feelings.

One concept that Ms. Armstrong stresses throughout her book is that none of the early Christians or Jews or Muslims meant what they wrote to be taken literally. They wrote symbolically because the subject they wrote about is too difficult to grasp unless the mind side-steps the logic and approaches religion and God through intuition and emotion.

God, she says, is to be found by examining our inner selves, our imaginations.

“Today many people in the West would be dismayed if a leading theologian suggested that God was in some profound sense a product of the imagination. Yet it should be obvious that the imagination is the chief religious faculty. It has been defined by Jean-Paul Sartre as “the ability to think of what is not”. Human beings are the only animals who have the capacity to envisage something that is not present or something that does not yet exist but which is merely possible. The imagination has thus been the cause of our major achievements in science and technology as well as in art and religion. The idea of God, however it is defined, is perhaps the prime example of an absent reality which, despite its inbuilt problems, has continued to inspire men and women for thousands for years. The only way we can conceive of God, who remains imperceptible to the senses and to logical proof, is by means of symbols, which it is the chief function of the imaginative mind to interpret.”

It's never made real clear whether Ms. Armstrong is making a case for “God? It's all in your imagination!” Or, “God! Let your imagination find him.” Or, better yet, understand your own mind, then you may find God. I, personally, can go any of these ways, at this point.

People, particularly Gnostics, like to say that God is in each of us. I like that. I'd even go further and say that God IS each of us.

Armstrong's book presents another dimension of this idea. She takes us back to the early 1200's, to the religion of Islam. Ibn al-Arabi, a major philosopher in Islam thinking back then, said that it is no good our trying to understand religious information that we have not experienced ourselves. Each of us is made to be unique and thus can know God only in our own unique way. We can only know our own personal god. It is impossible to know him in the same way as other people.

But our own personal way of knowing God can never be all there is to the being of God. God is too huge a concept. Thus, the only way God may be truly and completely known in this world is if we can release the god in ALL of us. In every single person who ever existed and who will ever exist.

This concept deals wonderfully well with the age-old dilemma of why evil exists in the world if God is so all-loving and caring. Evil exists because some of you out there have not found the god within you and it's going to take ALL of us to release God in the world.

Another facet of this idea is that God, whatever God is, becomes more completely revealed only as each individual sees God within himself.

This book says over and over again that Jews, Christians, and Muslims have developed remarkably similar ideas of God, which also resemble earlier concepts of God. When people try to find an ultimate meaning and value in human life, their minds seem to go in a certain direction. They have not been coerced to do this, it is something that seems natural to humanity.

Human beings cannot endure emptiness and desolation. They will fill the vacuum by creating a new focus of meaning. And so religions are born.

I'd like to close with a long quote from Umberto Eco in Foucault's Pendulum. This is not a quote from A History of God. I argued with myself a long time about including this quote for that reason. But, as I was reading her book, this quote kept playing in the back of my mind. It seems to fit with what Armstrong has said in her book, so I've decided to go with it.

The scene is a modern one. A young couple is talking together. The man has been struggling with the issues of religion and has been trying to ascribe to some greater power the reasons for why mankind has so many commonalities. Surely there must be some greater being that has caused us all to think as we do. His wife sets him down and tries to explain to him, in basic non-religious terms, why humans have all these amazing coincidences in religious symbols.

“...archetypes don’t exist, the body exists. The belly inside is beautiful, because the baby grows there...., and for this reason the cavern, the grotto, the tunnel are beautiful and important, and the labyrinth, too, which is made in the image of our wonderful intestines. When somebody wants to invent something beautiful and important, it has to come from there, because you also came from there the day you were born, because fertility always comes from inside a cavity, where first something rots, and then, lo and behold, there’s a little man, a date, a baobab.

And high is better than low, because if you have your head down, the blood goes to your brain, because feet stink and hair doesn’t stink as much, because it’s better to climb a tree and pick fruit than end up underground, food for worms, and because you rarely hurt yourself hitting something above—you really have to be in an attic—while you often hurt yourself falling. That’s why up is angelic and down devilish.

But because what I said before, about my belly, is also true, both things are true, down and inside are beautiful, and up and outside are beautiful, and the spirit of Mercury and Manichianism have nothing to do with it. Fire keeps you warm and cold gives you bronchial pneumonia, especially if you’re a scholar 4000 years ago, and therefore fire has mysterious virtues besides its ability to cook your chicken.

But cold preserves that same chicken, and fire, if you touch it, gives you a blister this big, therefore, if you think of something preserved for millennia, like wisdom, you have to think of it on a mountain, up, high (and high is good), but also in a cavern (which is good, too) and in the eternal cold of the Tibetan snows (best of all). And if you then want to know why wisdom comes from the Orient and not from the Swiss Alps, it’s because the body of your ancestors in the morning, when it woke and there was still darkness, looked to the east hoping the sun would rise and there wouldn’t be rain.

...The sun is good because it does the body good, and because it has the sense to reappear every day; therefore, whatever returns is good, not what passes and is done with. The easiest way to return from where you’ve been without retracing your steps is to walk in a circle. The animal that coils in a circle is the serpent; that’s why so many cults and myths of the serpent exist, because it’s hard to represent the return of the seen by the coiling of a hippopotamus.

Furthermore, if you have to make a ceremony to invoke the sun, it’s best to move in a circle, because if you go in a straight line, you move away from home, which means the ceremony will have to be kept short. The circle is the most convenient arrangement for any rites, even the fire-eaters in the marketplace know this, because in a circle everybody can see the one who’s in the center, whereas if a whole tribe formed a straight line, like a squad of soldiers, the people at the ends wouldn’t see. And that’s why the circle and rotary motion and cyclic return are fundamental to every cult and every rite.

“ ...All cultures worship menhirs, monoliths, pyramids, columns, but nobody bows down to balconies and railings. Did you ever hear of an archaic cult of the sacred

banister? You see? And another point: if you worship a vertical stone, even if there are a lot of you, you can all see it; but if you worship, instead, a horizontal stone, only those in the front row can see it, and the others start pushing, me too, me too, which is not a fitting sight for a magical ceremony....

....Rivers are worshipped not because they're horizontal, but because there's water in them, and you don't need me to explain to you the relation between water and the body....Anyway, that's how we're put together, all of us, and that's why we work out the same symbols millions of kilometers apart, and naturally they all resemble one another. They spent thousands of years looking for a message, and it was there all the time; they just had to look at themselves in the mirror."

Umberto Eco Foucault's Pendulum

We are all orphans, left on the doorstep of this planet. Let us hold on to each other for strength and support.