**Karen Armstrong’s God**

From the autobiographical *Through the Narrow Gate* in 1982*,* in which she describes her seven years as a nun in the convent of the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus, and in her follow up biographical work, *The Spiral Staircase,*  and in her later work in religious history Karen Armstrong has implicitly and explicitly described a personal spiritual journey that took her into the convent, then from the convent into atheism, then into something less well-defined where God, while not exactly worshipped, remains if not a presence, then an absent relevance. Armstrong, if not a believer herself, defends the seriousness of religion against a background of new atheism, defending its involvement in the search for something she calls ‘transcendence’ as well as what she sees as its commitment to ‘compassion’. There remains for her, if not God, then at least the idea of God, and the apparent importance of this [[1]](#endnote-1)idea to a well-lived human life.

Armstrong has always tried to present religion in a way that makes it seem reasonable, unavoidable even. She claims that man is a religious animal, a *homo religiosus,*  although this is more a historical claim than one rooted in any evolutionary model: ‘my study of the history of religion has revealed that human beings are spiritual animals’. She does not address the view that religion is part of man’s evolutionary delopment[[2]](#endnote-2), or rooted in a god-gene[[3]](#endnote-3). To support the idea that religion is largely reasonable, she is critical of, while sympathetic to fundamentalism. Fundamentalism is seen to arise from existential threats to religious communities, so Armstrong understands it but disapproves of it, and is keen to ensure that it is not identified with religion as such. Perhaps to further discourage fundamentalism she denies that religion is essentially *credal,* that is, defined by what one believes. Rather, it is seen as something that primarily affects the way one acts: ‘Religion … was not primarily something that people thought but something they did’[[4]](#endnote-4). In saying this, however, she does not seem to address the difficult issue of how people are able to act if they do not have beliefs or ‘thought’. Actions, one might think, taking a fairly routine philosophical view, emerge out of desires and beliefs. There is perhaps also the risk that presenting a view of religion as ‘thoughtless’ action may encourage a negative view of it.

Armstrong rejects, as one might expect, literal approaches to scripture. For her, religious statements are not essentially descriptive, so do not have a truth-value, but should be treated metaphorically or symbolically, almost as if they were poetry. At times, as in her book, *Tongues of Fire,* she has said more contentiously that religious language *is* just poetry. In her writings about scripture of many religions, Armstrong explains - reasonably enough - how the historical circumstances surrounding the development of texts, such as the Judaeo-Christian Bible, make it impossible to see them as a basis for very certain beliefs about the nature of an objective God[[5]](#endnote-5). Rather, they are seen as the metaphorical and historically situated response of a certain community to their spiritual needs, in particular their response to a need for and capacity for transcendence.

Transcendence lies at the heart of Armstrong’s sense of the nature of religion. She believes that human beings are capable of ‘a dimension of the spirit that seems to transcend the mundane world’[[6]](#endnote-6). She feels that all the major world religions have at their heart a mystical character which seeks this transcendence, seen as ‘a reality in the depths of the self that is, paradoxically, Other and irrevocably separate from us’[[7]](#endnote-7). As for many others, Armstrong sees this experience as a sense of the loss of the ego, and its submergence in a wider sense of the world. This loss of ego is part of what enables the religious person to take certain ethical views, in particular ones that involve absolute regard for the other, leading hopefully into compassion.

Interestingly, Armstrong herself admits to having rarely had such an experience and perhaps only in her experience of art. Strikingly, she concedes that in the convent, she never had such any such awareness of God. However, she sees the ‘reality’ present in the moment of transcendence as what religious people have tended to mean by the word ‘God’. Whether this is true, of course, is difficult to assess. What is clear is that most religions have also had a less mystical, more rationalistic sense of the nature of God, one that involves seeing Him less as a reality in the depths of the self and more as something genuinely other. The vision of God possessed by a medieval theologian like St. Anselm, for example, is clearly focused on something that is profoundly other, Anselm’s famous idea of ‘that than which nothing greater can be conceived’, whose existence is therefore essential. It is clear that Armstrong is less interested in such rationalistic conceptions of God and this may influence the way in which she characterises the religions she discusses.

In addition, placing mystical transcendence at the heart of religion could also be seen to undermine her other attempts to present religion as a largely reasonable feature of many peoples’ lives. Others who have sought to present religion as reasonable – one thinks notably of John Locke in the 17th century[[8]](#endnote-8) – would no doubt have felt that inclinations towards mysticism militate against this, tending to what he called ‘enthusiasm’. Armstrong clearly thinks this is less off-putting than any sense of religion as a set of literal beliefs, or philosophical convictions.

Armstrong’s interest in the notion of transcendence links in with her strong emphasis on the *mythical* character of religion. It is possible that man’s nature as a religious animal emerges for Armstrong from his more fundamental nature as a myth-maker: ‘Human beings have always been mythmakers’[[9]](#endnote-9). For she sees all men and women as myth-makers, even if they are not religious. Where they are not religious, they create myths in art and elsewhere. Myth-building is seen as essential to our capacity to cope with earthly life. Through it, we invent a pattern against which we can set our own lives and through which we can give our own lives meaning in the face of suffering and death, ‘from the very beginning we invented stories that enabled us to place our lives in a larger setting, that revealed an underlying pattern, and gave us a sense that, against all the depressing and chaotic evidence to the contrary, life had meaning and value’[[10]](#endnote-10) Such a view, of course, is not new. In *The Birth of Tragedy,* Nietzsche had explained the significance of Greek myths in this way, and he called it the only rational way by which we could deal with evil and suffering.

The sense of religion as mythology, and the alleged power of mythology, underlies Armstrong’s sense of the value of religion and, in particular its immunity to the kind of rational criticism aimed at it by Enlightenment atheism and the neo-Enlightenment version of this in the so-called new atheism of such as Richard Dawkins. Because religion showsitself in human life through myth and through action, and because religious statement should always be seen as symbol, or poetry, Armstrong is sometimes sceptical of the effect and value of rational criticism of it. She is given to comments such as, ‘Religion was never supposed to provide answers to questions that lay within the reach of human reason.’[[11]](#endnote-11). In making them, she is presumably not unaware of their possible internal contradictoriness. Take, for instance, a similar sort of comment by the Christian theologian, Alistair McGrath, commenting on the apparent irrationality of the Christian beliefs about the Trinity. He notes, ‘there are limits placed upon the human ability to grasp the things of God. Our knowledge of God is accommodated to our capacity … God therefore both discloses divine truths, and enters into our world, in forms that are tempered and adapted to our limited abilities and competencies’.[[12]](#endnote-12) Here, the theologian might be seen to be conveniently placing God beyond reason whilst simultaneously making rational assessments of the nature of a God that would have this character. If God does lie entirely beyond our capacities, if, that is, He is entirely transcendent to us, then it may seem that we can resort to nothing but silence. Are we even justified in asserting that God’s character lies beyond our capacities to grasp it?

Armstrong, interestingly, claims that *even* philosophy understood the limits of reason in this respect : ‘People did not go to Socrates to learn anything - he always insisted that he had nothing to teach them’. This is perhaps true of Socrates, although may the element of irony in Socrates’ apparent claims to this effect, for he so often seems to tread a fine line between drawing out the views of his interlocutor and ensuring that what is drawn out is entirely correct. In any case, Armstrong has a tendency to go too far in the downgrading of the place of reason both in the development of religion and its criticism. It cannot be ignored that all the great religions have maintained that what they took on faith was at least consistent with reason, and they generally tried to deal with rational criticism, even if it was only to suppress it.

A sense that religion ultimately has its roots in myth may not, in any case, be sufficient to defend it against rational criticism, and perhaps it should not. One can perfectly coherently recognise in human beings something that is profoundly non-rational and hope that it might be overcome. One sees this, for example, in Freud’s *Future of An Illusion,* in which he points out the profound compulsion towards belief in God in the human unconscious, whilst hoping and expecting that it will one day be overcome by rational education. Armstrong, who has a deep sense of the arts, has a strong sympathy for myth, but even in the arts this is not shared by all. One thinks, for instance, of the English poet Philip Larkin’s disparaging remarks about the ‘myth-kitty’ that is drawn on by desperate poets. And one might think that it is necessary to be continually critical of numerous myths, such as those that are used by enthusiastic governments to uphold their own sense of national righteousness. The thought that man will remain a myth-making animal – even if it were true – may not wholly support the view that he will remain a religious animal.

Given her complex view of religion, Armstrong’s view of God is complex. She claims now to be an atheist, but she frequently points out that atheism is the rejection of a particular form of God. If we simply see God as a name for a subjective ‘reality’ that is apprehended in certain moments of transcendence, then it still remains possible for someone like Armstrong to say that she believes in God. But she has certainly rejected the personalised God that she sought in the convent. Even though her life is spent studying religion and theology, she was concerned when people saw her as a religious person : ‘I often felt rather a fraud … After all, I wasn’t a truly religious person. I never went near a church and did not belong to an official religious community … There was still emptiness where the personalized God used to be.’ But even this situation could be complicated by the way in which some religious people would regard such an emptiness as another name for God. Armstrong herself recognises this, and is critical for this reason of so-called new atheism : ‘the new atheists are not radical enough. Jewish, Christian and Muslim theologians have insisted for centuries that God does not exist and that there is ‘nothing’ out there: in making these assertions their aim was not to deny the reality of God but to safeguard God’s transcendence.’ This is a reference to the idea of the ‘hidden’ God, the so-called *deus absconditus,* for which there is no obvious evidence – and plenty of counter-evidence. If there is a God, it seems to say, then you can be absolutely sure that He will not show himself.

Armstrong is adamant that God should not be viewed as a particular kind of ‘being’, to be set alongside all the other beings that we imagine exist, differing from them not so much in existing, but in His properties. Where things in space and time have mass, and living things have mind and life, God is seen as perhaps non-spatial, non-temporal, non-physical, but a ‘being’ nonetheless, possessed of a mind and life. This is St. Anselm’s medieval God, the one Armstrong tried to worship in the convent, the one who exists necessarily because He is greater than anything that can be conceived and such a being must therefore possess existence of necessity, alongside His other extraordinary qualities of omnipotence, omniscience and infinite goodness. This God is also a *person* and a person with whom one can communicate, and who loves you. This is the great God of high Christian Rationalism, but Armstrong does not think He exists.

Indeed, she regards such a God as deeply off-putting, and is at pains to point out alternative conceptions of God that have appeared at different times and in different cultures. She is drawn particularly to a neo-Platonist theologian, Dionysus the Areopagite, and it is of someone like him that she talks when she says, ‘Christian … theologians made it clear that while it was important to put our ideas about the divine into words, these doctrines were man-made and, therefore, were bound to be inadequate …. the words we use to describe mundane things were simply not suitable for God. ‘He’ was not good, divine, powerful or intelligent in any way that we could understand. We could not even say that God ‘existed’, because our concept of existence was too limited’.[[13]](#endnote-13)

In contrast, therefore, to the Christian Rationalist sense of God as a necessarily existent being, Armstrong is drawn to more mystical views of God, in which even talk of His existence is not permitted. She is in sympathy with traditions in non-Christian cultures, such as we see in the Rig Veda: ‘There was neither non-existence nor existence then; there was neither the realm of space nor the sky which is beyond. What stirred? Where? In whose protection? Was there water, [[14]](#endnote-14)bottomlessly deep?’ In relation to God, one could say essentially nothing. One’s awareness of God could partly be translated into this sense of nothing, although it also remained inappropriate to speak of God as non-existing. One’s sense of God, if one had one, was a sense perhaps of this paradoxicality, of a something that was nothing, and yet not nothing. Of this one could essentially only speak nonsense if one spoke at all. One’s awareness of this mystery could show itself only in action. Armstrong describes how important to her spiritual development was her growing awareness of how, in Judaism, what is believed is considered so much less important than action, and how the awareness of God, such as it is, is manifest in even the mundane practice of the law: ‘The 613 commandments of the Law brought God into the minutiae of daily life, whether one was eating, drinking, cooking, working or making love. No activity, no matter how mundane, was without religious potential. Each was what Christians called a sacrament: it was an opportunity to encounter the divine, moment by moment’.[[15]](#endnote-15)

The denial that God is a being, together with the claim that He does not exist, is not the easiest thing to understand. Indeed, it is part of this very doctrine that we do not understand it, for we have to recognise that the words and concepts that we use to embrace God are always inadequate. The denial that God is a being is a view shared by a number of different thinkers. It may, for instance, amount to an acceptance of what is called Pantheism, the idea that God and Being are actually the same thing. On such a view, God is not *a* being, but all Being. But this does not seem to be the view that Armstrong takes. For the Pantheist, God is not transcendent, but actually manifest in all things. Nor does Armstrong seem to be interested in the related doctrine of Panentheism, according to which all Being is *in* God. Both doctrines would seem to give an access to God that Armstrong wants to deny, with her strong doctrine of transcendence. Both doctrines would also seem to give too much scope to the idea that God, somehow, ‘exists’. Armstrong is drawn more to the idea that God does not ‘exist’ nor does He ‘not exist’. In saying this, she also seems to avoid a view like Paul Tillich’s, in which God is seen not as Being but as the *source* of Being. Too much weight seems to rest here on the word ‘source’. For Tillich, after all, himself denies that God is the *cause* of Being, so that we would have to grasp some conception of source which was not equivalent to being a cause. In line with her sympathies for Dionysius, Armstrong seems to lean towards the view that it would be equally inappropriate to claim that God was the source, or that He was not the source of Being.

One could plausibly argue that her view of God is also similar to that of the well-known contemporary theologian, Don Cupitt, one of the key proponents of the so-called non-realist view of God that became very popular in the 1960s through the work of John Robinson, in his book *Honest to God.* Cupitt talks of God in this way, ‘God is the central, unifying symbol of the religious life. The unconditional religious requirement (‘the will of God’) is an autonomous inner imperative that urges us to fulfil our highest possible destiny as spiritual, self-conscious beings emerging from nature.’ For Cupitt, there is something essentially *subjective* about God. There is no God ‘out there’, not even as ‘the source of being’. Rather God is a name for a particular kind of inner transformation, one that particularly involves a new ethical stance towards the world.

Religion, and the idea of God, is also important to Armstrong from an ethical point of view. It encourages, she believes, and arguably encourages uniquely, a sense of the infinite value of human life. She has tried to develop an ethic of compassion that she feels is rooted in all of the major world traditions, and has actively campaigned in support of this ethic. Armstrong is strongly pluralist in her religious outlook, and throughout her writings has shown implicit support to the view that many of the major world’s religious traditions have common foundations, based around the notions of transcendence and compassion. She is particularly inclined to the view that the great monotheistic faiths of Judaism, Islam and Christianity are more similar than different. Overall, Armstrong has tried to show how important religious outlooks have been to our ancestors, and to show in addition that they will, even should, remain important as long as human life exists on earth.

The idea that religion leads towards a distinctive ethical position is a very powerful one. Cupitt’s view of religion is heavily influenced by Buddhism, and he sees the internal transformation at the heart of it as a complete diminishment of the ego, and the recognition of the significance of the other. Armstrong is clearly very sympathetic to this view. It is noticeable in her autobiographical writings how she felt that her sense of the needs of the other was actually undermined by her life in the convent, which seemed to discourage the development of human intimacies. At the heart of her own ethics of compassion is a view about the apparently infinite value of the other, or what in the charter of the Council of Conscience she helped to form is called ‘the inviolable sanctity of every single human being’.[[16]](#endnote-16) It is this which it is felt will led to ‘treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect’.

Of course, one of the most powerful arguments against religion has been the counter-claim to the view that without religion, ethics becomes impossible. Ivan Karamazov, in Dostoevsky’s novel had said that the death of God had meant that all was permitted. But this seemed to ignore the plethora of non-religious ethical systems based, not in God, but in reason, or virtue, or sentiment, or utility. What might be argued, though, is that none of these systems quite amounts to what a religious ethic, founded in the nullification of the personal ego, might prescribe.

No secular ethic, for instance, seems to be founded in the view that the other is always more important than the self. Kant had argued, for instance, that it was never morally permissible to use another as a means to an end. But Kant’s view is based in the perceived moral *equivalence* of rational beings, so that one cannot rationally treat someone else in a way that one would not wish to be treated oneself. Kant had effectively taken the Golden Rule (‘Do unto others as you would wish to be done unto’) and argued that to ignore it was irrational. But this did not amount to arguing that one should treat the other as always more important than oneself.

Secular ethics are strongly rooted in the idea of the *equality* of each individual, rather than in the greater moral demand of the other. In a religious ethic, each regards the other as more important than herself, not as merely equal. Armstrong discusses such an ethic in Buddhism, involving the four immeasurable minds of love : *maitri,* the desire to bring happiness to others; *karuna*, the desire to free others from pain; *mudita,* delight in the happiness of others and *upeksha*, an impartial love of others. Secular ethics that talk of duty, like Kant’s ethics, do not especially focus on the need to bring happiness others, delight in the happiness of others or to free others from pain. One does not treat another as a means to an end by failing to bring them happiness, so that the imposition of the Kantian ethic results in an apparently lower regard for the interests of the other than might be fostered by something like this Buddhist ethic.

Some utilitarians, like Peter Singer, have argued that the requirement to maximise happiness actually leads to an ethic in which we are morally obliged to provide to the other up to that point where we find ourselves no better off than they. Whether this is true, it is even then not an ethic that requires one of make oneself worse off than the other, to actually sacrifice one’s own interests for those of the other. John Stuart Mill recognised that such behaviour, while clearly virtuous, was not built into the utilitarian requirement.

In effect, Armstrong asks us to adopt a form of virtue ethics, in which a virtue like compassion becomes primary. The religious dimension of such a virtue may reside in the requirement that we treat the other as more important than ourselves. It is through the apparent manifestation of such behaviours in spiritual traditions that Armstrong thinks that we can achieve such compassion. In this way, perhaps, we will manifesting a sense of God, or at least of something spiritual, and the closest we are able to come to an idea of God, giving that such an idea lies beyond all our rational and linguistic capacities. It will be in our lives that we show our sense of God.

We find similar views, perhaps, to Armstrong’s in the world of an earlier theologian, Harvey Cox. For Cox, God is conceived in a largely secular way. Cox accepts and emphasises the *hiddenness* of God, a feature of God’s alleged transcendence, which explains why we find no incontestable evidence of God in our lives, and considerable evidence that He does not exist. For Cox, the idea of God has to be cashed out, somehow, almost wholly in terms of political commitment. It is in one’s relationship to other human beings that one develops a relationship to God, but these relationships must be political.

Armstrong also offers something of a political programme with the founding of the Charter for Compassion in liaison with figures from the world faiths. Even so, her approach seems somewhat different to that of Cox. In his own attempts to make sense of the idea of God in the modern world, he also rejected the idea of God as a being about which we might have very specific beliefs. But instead of rooting a new sense of religion in the power of mythology, he sought instead for something more contemporary, more linked to the experience of so many people as citizens within complex, technological urban environments. He stressed that ‘If theology is to survive and to make any sense to the contemporary world, it must neither cling to a metaphysical world nor collapse into a mythical mode. It must push into the living lexicon of the urban-secular man’ (p.220,).

Armstrong’s view of religion is perhaps more personal than this, more rooted in changes in individual consciousness, without any obvious attempts to galvanise political action on a larger scale. But broadly, it is a similar view, one in which the idea of God must shift from that which governed her thinking in the convent, and which formed the foundation of much of Christian thinking, to one in which the idea of God becomes, perhaps, more subjective, in the tradition of thinkers like Cupitt, and Cox. God becomes the name for, in particular, a certain stance towards others, one that is distinct from secular moralities no matter how similar they may seem on the surface. It becomes one in which we aim not meanly for the liberal ideal of equality, but for a real diminishment in our own eyes of the significance of our own ego, and with that come to see the other as of paramount importance. Whether we think there *is* a God is no longer the key issue. Indeed, it may be better to recognise that we can say nothing sensible about this. In effect, God is nothing. Against this nothingness we can do nothing but show compassion to the other, constantly, and primarily. That is the religious life, and it is distinctive because no secular morality makes a similar demand on us.

1. A History of God, p.3 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See for instance, *Darwin’s Cathedral* [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See for instance *The God Gene* [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. *Religion,* p.7 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See for instance *Genesis* & *The Lost Art of Scripture* [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. *A History of God, p. 6* [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. *Vision of God,* p.ix [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. see e.g. *The Reasonableness of Christianity* [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. A Short History of Myth, p.1 [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. A Short History of Myth, p.2 [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. The Case for God, p.305 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. *Christian Theology,* p.235 [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. *Religion,* p.3 [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. *Creation Hymn (Nasadiya), p.25* [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. *The Spiral Staircase, p.275* [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life, p.*4 [↑](#endnote-ref-16)