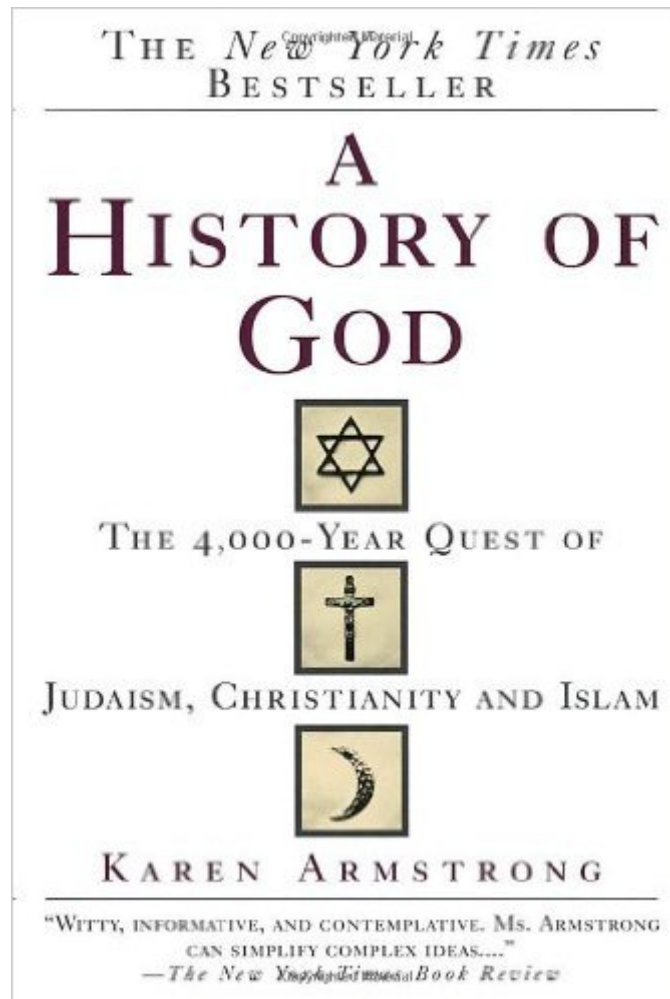


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A History Of God: The 4,000-Year Quest Of Judaism, Christianity And Islam



Synopsis

"An admirable and impressive work of synthesis that will give insight and satisfaction to thousands of lay readers." THE WASHINGTON POST BOOK WORLD
In this stunningly intelligent book, Karen Armstrong, one of Britain's foremost commentators on religious affairs, traces the history of how men and women have perceived and experienced God, from the time of Abraham to the present. From classical philosophy and medieval mysticism to the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the modern age of skepticism, Karen Armstrong performs the near miracle of distilling the intellectual history of monotheism into one superbly readable volume, destined to take its place as a classic.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Karen Armstrong has put together an impressive work that examines in depth the evolution of God and our perceptions of the transcendent. It's a wonderful starting point, however a dedicated reader should certainly explore other books to round out topics that the author touched lightly upon (Paul) or even omitted entirely (the influence of Eastern religions). I think some of the criticisms levied at this book are misplaced. There seems to be a theme in these reviews that the author tends to slam Western Christianity and goes easy on Islam. This seems true to a certain extent, yet deliberate. The book is obviously aimed at Western readers; Christianity is so deeply imbued in so much of our culture that it bears a fearless scrutiny. While no doubt painful for some (Christian) readers, it's illuminating and honest. The author is obviously learned in Muslim history, yet she may have covered it in more depth than many Western readers might want. Also as one reviewer noted, "by failing to extend to Islam the razor of her sarcasm, she invites distrust". True, yet again there is so

little positive perception of Islam in the West, that this appears intentional. This is the most notable flaw in the book, but not a fatal one. What she did explain *very* well: 1. How pagan idol worship evolved into Jewish monotheism. 2. How the Trinity concept came about and grew. 3. The intellectual rift between and differences in Western and Eastern Orthodox Christianity. 4. Mysticism and its ramifications. One reviewer called this a modern "dead end". I couldn't disagree more. Overall, quite excellent and probably the best starting point for someone who wants to explore this fascinating topic. She has struck the best balance I've seen so far between depth, complexity and readability. Highly recommended.

A History of God was one of the most important books I've read. Karen Armstrong fearlessly, yet respectfully, traces the history of monotheistic thought from its earliest conception to the present day, all in a readable, lay-language book. It doesn't get much better, in my opinion. However, be cautioned. If you are inclined to cling to old dogma, or frightened by the possibility that God might not be exactly what you were taught in Sunday School, then don't bother picking up this book. It will haunt you. On the other hand, if you are seeking a more clear picture of who God might really be, if you are open to the possibility that our concept of Him has evolved enormously since the days of Abraham, then this might be an excellent read for you. Besides a good history lesson, it is insightful for the Western reader to gain an understanding of the "non-Christian" monotheistic traditions, i.e. Judaism and Islam. Armstrong does a wonderful (and contrary to some critics, I believe a FAIR) job of explaining how both Christianity and later Islam branched off of the Judaic traditions. Above all, it places the evolution of the God-concept into its cultural context, without which, our current God-concept is little more than a wholesale belief in so much mythology. Be prepared to think, to change your mind, and to emerge from the end of this book a changed person.

Karen Armstrong gives the readers a comprehensive view of the evolution of the three monotheistic faiths. In many respects, this is an eye-opening history, and will probably make many fundamentalists of all three faiths weep and gnash their teeth, and with good reason. We need to see that God is as much an evolving idea as He is a Being (or, perhaps, "Non-being") that creates and sustains us. Armstrong deftly shows us how the early Hebrews developed their concept of Yahweh from the early pagan war and fertility cults, how the concept of Jesus as savior and sacrifice for our sins developed, how the issue of the Trinity was addressed, and how Islam came to be. What was distressing, though, is that while Armstrong correctly, in my opinion, points out the dangers of a literal God, goes too far in condemning an anthropomorphic God. I found myself

depressed by the end of the book, questioning the conclusion, it seemed, that God did not exist, or if he did, he wasn't there as a Being. Reading this book certainly shook my faith, and I recommend reading this book with care, especially as one gets into the later chapters that focus on the development of atheism. Readers who are in a state of spiritual upheaval could find this book extremely challenging, though I believe that faith grows from our doubts.

Karen Armstrong teaches the development of monotheistic faith in a way I wish my seminary professors would have done. This book is extremely well documented. Every assertion is backed by historical documents or historical evidence. The glossary alone opens up a world of terms and concepts that leaves me in a meditative awe. The Suggestions for Further Reading is definitely my shopping list for future study. In contrast, my seminary education was long on political correctness and short on factual evidence. Armstrong deals with feminist issues honestly and with sensitivity. Impressively, she does not relinquish factual evidence for political correctness, which almost all liberal education does today. She gives us an accurate history, and at the same time, frequently reminds us these are only feeble human ideas, and not the "Ineffable God." Also, she tells the story of modern atheism in a way that makes me nod my head in agreement without giving up my own perception of God. Wow! Armstrong does seem to fudge on the person of Mohammed. She tells how he organized men for war and brutally defeated his enemies, then almost as a direct contradiction of the evidence, she proclaims him a man of peace. Putting that aside, I've been very enlightened by her account of the Islamic faith. So many things I hadn't known! You can't miss the point of the book. God is "ineffable," beyond all human categories, concepts, experiences, and even beyond existence itself. That blows my mind. She makes her point beautifully without leaving me feeling too threatened. Again, seminary professors should take a lesson. I've told all my friends about the book, and I'm sure by now they're all sick of me and Karen Armstrong. Sorry. The book is simply excellent.

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