

Armstrong: Karen: The Case for God; Homo Religiosus.

Contains chapter 12, The Death of God, and two book reviews.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SJMm4RAwVLo> Prize Winning Speech: Compassion

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V-bkZc7SWLQ> In defense of Islam

1.

Inside Book Jacket: Moving from the Paleolithic age to the present, Karen Armstrong details the great lengths to which humankind has gone in order to experience a sacred reality that it called by many names, such as God, Brahman, Nirvana, Allah, or Dao. Focusing especially on Christianity but including Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Chinese spiritualities, Armstrong examines the diminished impulse toward religion in our own time, when a significant number of people either want nothing to do with God or question the efficacy of faith. **Why has God become unbelievable?** Why is it that atheists and theists alike now think and speak about God in a way that veers so profoundly from the thinking of our ancestors?

Answering these questions with the same depth of knowledge and profound insight that have marked all her acclaimed books, Armstrong makes clear how the changing face of the world has necessarily changed the importance of religion at both the societal and the individual level. And she makes a powerful, convincing argument for drawing on the insights of the past in order to build a faith that speaks to the needs of our dangerously polarized age. **Yet she cautions us that religion was never supposed to provide answers that lie within the competence of human reason; that, she says, is the role of *logos*. The task of religion is "to help us live creatively, peacefully, and even joyously with realities for which there are no easy explanations."** She emphasizes, too, that religion will not work automatically. It is, she says, a practical discipline: its insights are derived not from abstract speculation but from "dedicated intellectual endeavor" and a "compassionate lifestyle that enables us to break out of the prism of selfhood."

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Chapter on Death of God? During the 1960s, Europe experienced a dramatic loss of faith. After a rise in religious observance during the austerity years immediately after the Second World War, for example, British people stopped going to church in unprecedented numbers and the decline has steadily continued. A recent poll has estimated that only about 6 percent of Britons attend a religious service regularly. In both Europe and the United States, sociologists proclaimed the triumph of secularism. In 1965, *The Secular City*, a best seller by the American theologian Harvey Cox, claimed that God was dead and that henceforth religion must center on humanity rather than a transcendent deity; if Christianity failed to absorb these new values, the churches would perish. The decline of religion was just one sign of major cultural change during this decade, when many of the institutional structures of modernity were pulled down: censorship was relaxed, abortion and homosexuality were legalized, divorce became easier, the women's movement campaigned for gender equality, and the young railed against the modern ethos of their parents. They called for a more just and equal society, protested against the materialism of

their governments, and refused to fight in their nation's wars or to study in its universities. They created an "alternative society" in revolt against the mainstream.

Some saw the new wave of secularism as the fulfillment of the rational ethos of the Enlightenment. Others saw the 1960s as the beginning of the end of the Enlightenment project and the start of "post modernity.:" Truths hitherto regarded as self-evident were called into question: the teachings of Christianity, the subordination of women, and the structures of social and moral authority. There was a new skepticism about the role of science, the modern expectation of continuous progress, and the Enlightenment ideal of rationality. The modern dualities of mind/body; spirit/matter, and reason/emotion were challenged. Finally, the "lower orders," who had marginalized and even subjugated during the modern period women, homosexuals, blacks, indigenous populations, colonized peoples were demanding and beginning to achieve liberation.

Atheism was no longer regarded as a term of abuse. As Nietzsche had predicted, the idea of God had simply died, and for the first time ordinary folk, who were not pioneering scientists or philosophers were happy to call *themselves* atheists.' They did not spend time examining the scientific and rational arguments against God's existence: for many Europeans, God had simply become *otiosus* ("superfluous"), as the political philosophers Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt have explained:

Modern negativity is located not in any transcendent realm but in the hard reality before us: the fields of patriotic battles in the First and Second World Wars, from the killing fields at Verdun to the Nazi furnaces and the swift annihilation of thousands in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the carpet bombing of Vietnam and Cambodia, the massacres from Setif and Soweto to Sabra and Shatila, and the list goes on and on. There is no Job who can sustain such suffering.'

Belief had emerged as the enemy of peace. John Lennon's son "Imagine" (1971) looked forward to a world where there was heaven and no hell-"above us only sky." The elimination of G would solve the world's problems. This was a simplistic belief, in many of the conflicts that had inspired the peace movement we caused by an imbalance of political power, secular nationalism, and the struggle for world domination. But religion had been implicate in many of these atrocities: in Northern Ireland and the Middle East it had served as a tribal or ethnic marker, it was used rhetorically by politicians, and it was clear that it had signally failed in its mandate saving the world.

In the United States, a small group of theologians created a form of "Christian atheism" that tried to engage with the "hard reality" of world events and enthusiastically proclaimed the death of God. In *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (1966), Thomas J. J. Altizer (b. 1927) announced the "good news": God's demise had freed us from slavery to a tyrannical, transcendent deity. Altizer spoke in mystical, poetic terms of the dark night of the soul, the pain of abandonment, and the silence that must ensue before what we mean by "God" can become meaningful once more. Our former notions of divinity had to die before theology could be reborn. In *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* (1963), Paul Van Buren (1924-98) argued that science and technology had invalidated traditional mythology. Even the sophisticated theology of Bultmann or Tillich was still immersed in the old, unviable ethos. We must give up God and focus on Jesus of Nazareth, the liberator, who "defines what it is

to be a man."5 William Hamilton (b. 1924) saw Death of God theology as a twentieth-century way of being Protestant in *Radical Theology and the Death of God* (1966): just as Luther had left his cloister and gone out into the world, the modern Christian must walk away from the sacred place where God used to be; he would find the man Jesus in the world of technology, power, money, sex and the city. Human beings did not need God; they must find their own solution to the world's problems.

The Death of God movement was flawed: it was essentially a white, middle-class, affluent, and-sometimes offensively-Christian theology. Like Hegel, Altizer saw the Jewish God as the alienating deity that had been negated by Christianity. Black theologians asked how white people felt able to affirm freedom through God's death when they had enslaved people in God's name. But despite its limitations, Death of God theology was a prophetic voice calling for a critique of contemporary idols (which included the modern idea of God) and urging a leap from familiar certainties into the unknown that was in tune with the spirit of the sixties.

But despite its vehement rejection of the authoritarian structures of institutional religion, sixties youth culture was demanding a more religious way of life. Instead of going to church, the young went to Kathmandu or sought solace in the meditative techniques of the Orient. Others found transcendence in drug-induced trips, or personal transformation in such techniques as the Erhard Seminars Training (est). There was a hunger for *myth os* and a rejection of the scientific rationalism that had become the new Western orthodoxy. Much twentieth-century science had been cautious, sober, and highly conscious in a disciplined, principled way of its limitations and areas of competence. But since the time of Descartes, science had also been ideological and had refused to countenance any other method of arriving at truth. During the sixties, the youth revolution was in part a protest against the illegitimate domination of rational discourse and the suppression of *mythos* by *logos*. But because the understanding of the traditional ways of arriving at more intuitive knowledge had been neglected in the West during the modern period, the sixties quest for spirituality was often wild, self-indulgent, and unbalanced.

It was, therefore, premature to speak of the death of religion, and this became evident in the late 1970s, when confidence in the imminent arrival of the Secular City was shattered by a dramatic religious resurgence. In 1978-79, the Western world watched in astonishment as an obscure Iranian ayatollah brought down the regime of Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi (1919-80), which had seemed to be one of the most progressive and stable in the Middle East. At the same time as governments applauded the peace initiative of President Anwar alSad at of Egypt (1918-81), observers noted that young Egyptians were donning Islamic dress, casting aside the freedoms of modernity, and engaging in a takeover of university campuses in order to reclaim them for religion-in a way that was paradoxically reminiscent of student rebellions during the sixties. In Israel, an aggressively religious form of Zionism (which had originally been a defiantly secular movement) had risen to political prominence, and the ultra Orthodox parties, which David Ben-Gurion (1886-1973), Israel's first prime minister, had confidently predicted would fade away once the Jewish people had their own secular state, were gathering strength. In the United States, Jerry Farwell (1933-2007) founded the Moral Majority in 1979, urging Protestant fundamentalists to get involved in politics and to challenge any state or federal legislation that pushed a "secular

humanist" agenda.

This militant religiosity, which would emerge in every region where a secular, Western-style government had separated religion and politics, is determined to drag God and/or religion from the sidelines to which they have been relegated in modern culture and back to center field. It reveals a widespread disappointment in modernity. Whatever the pundits, intellectuals, or politicians thought, people all over the world were demonstrating that they wanted to see religion more clearly reflected in public life. This new form of piety is popularly known as "fundamentalism," but many object to having this Christian term foisted on their reform movements. They do not in fact represent an atavistic return to the past. These are essentially innovative movements and could have taken root at no time other than our own. Fundamentalisms too can be seen as part of the postmodern rejection of modernity. They are not orthodox and conservative; indeed, many are actually anti-orthodox and regard the more conventional faithful as part of the problem."

These movements have mushroomed independently, and even those that have emerged within the same tradition do not have an identical vision. However, they bear what has been called a "family resemblance," and seem instinctively to follow the pattern set by American Protestant fundamentalism, the earliest of these movements. All are initially defensive movements rooted in a profound fear of annihilation, which causes them to develop a paranoid vision of the "enemy." They begin as intrafaith movements, and only at a secondary stage, if at all, do they direct their attention to a foreign foe.

Protestant fundamentalism was chiefly exercised by theological questions that had been challenged by the new scientific discoveries. Fundamentalisms in other traditions have been sparked by entirely different problems and are not preoccupied with "belief" in the same way. In Judaism, the state of Israel has inspired everyone of the Jewish fundamentalisms, because this has been the form in which secularism has chiefly impacted on Jewish religious life. Some are passionately *for* the state of Israel and regard its army, political institutions, and every inch of the Holy Land as sacred; others are either vehemently *opposed* to the notion of a secular state or adopt a deliberately neutral stance toward it. In the Muslim world, the political state of the *ummah*, the "community," has become an Achilles' heel. The Qur'an insists that the prime duty of a Muslim is to build a just and decent society, so when Muslims see the *ummah* exploited or even terrorized by foreign powers and governed by corrupt rulers, they can feel as religiously offended as a Protestant who sees the Bible spat upon. Islam has traditionally been a religion of success: in the past, Muslims were always able to surmount disaster and use it creatively to rise to new spiritual and political heights. The Qur'an assures them that if their society is just and egalitarian, it will prosper-not because God is tweaking history on their behalf but because this type of government is in line with the fundamental laws of existence. But Muslims have been able to make little headway against the secular West, and some have found this as threatening as Darwinism seems to fundamentalist Christians. Hence there have been ever more frantic efforts to get Islamic history back on track.

Because fundamentalists feel under threat, they are defensive and unwilling to entertain any rival point of view, yet another expression of the intolerance that has always been part of modernity. Christian fundamentalists take a hard line on what they regard as moral and social decency. They campaign against the teaching of evolution in public schools, are fiercely patriotic but averse to democracy, see feminism as one of the great evils of the day, and conduct a crusade

against abortion. Some extremists have even murdered doctors and nurses who work in abortion clinics. Like evolution, abortion has become symbolic of the murderous evil of modernity. Christian fundamentalists are convinced that their doctrinal "beliefs" are an accurate, final expression of sacred truth and that every word of the Bible is literally true-an attitude that is a radical departure from mainstream Christian tradition. They believe that miracles are an essential hallmark of true faith and that God will give the believer anything he asks for in prayer.

Fundamentalists are swift to condemn people whom they regard as the enemies of God: most Christian fundamentalists see Jews and Muslims as destined for hellfire, and some regard Buddhism, Hinduism, and Daoism as inspired by the devil. Jewish and Muslim fundamentalists take a similar stance, each seeing their own tradition as the only true faith. Muslim fundamentalists have toppled governments, and some extremists have been guilty of terrorist atrocities. Jewish fundamentalists have founded illegal settlements in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip with the avowed intention of driving out the Arab inhabitants, convinced that they are paving the way for the Messiah; others throw stones at Israelis who drive their cars on the Sabbath.

In all its forms, fundamentalism is a fiercely reductive faith. In their anxiety and fear, fundamentalists often distort the tradition they are trying to defend. They can, for example, be highly selective in their reading of scripture. Christian fundamentalists quote extensively from the book of Revelation and are inspired by its violent End-time vision but rarely refer to the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus tells his followers to love their enemies, to turn the other cheek, and not to judge others. Jewish fundamentalists rely heavily on the Deuteronomist sections of the Bible and seem to pass over the rabbis' injunction that exegesis should lead to charity. Muslim fundamentalists ignore the pluralism of the Qur'an, and extremists quote its more aggressive verses to justify violence, pointedly disregarding its far more numerous calls for peace, tolerance, and forgiveness. Fundamentalists are convinced that they are fighting for God, but in fact this type of religiosity represents a retreat from God. To make purely human, historical phenomena-such as "family values," "the Holy Land," or "Islam"-sacred and absolute is idolatry, and, as always, their idol forces them to try to destroy its opponents.

But it is essential for critics of religion to see fundamentalism in historical context. Far from being typical of faith, it is an aberration. The fundamentalist fear of annihilation is not a paranoid delusion. We have seen that some of the most formative creators of the modern ethos have indeed called for the abolition of religion-and they continue to do so. All these movements begin with what is perceived to be an attack by liberal co religionists or a secularist regime, and further assaults simply make them more extreme. We have seen how this occurred in the United States after the media harassment in the wake of the Scopes trial. In the Jewish world, fundamentalism took two major steps forward: first, after the Shoah, when Hitler had tried to exterminate European Jewry; and second, after the October War of 1973, when the Arab armies took Israel by surprise and made a much better showing on the battlefield.

The same pattern is observable in the Muslim world. It would be a grave mistake to imagine that Islam caused Muslims to recoil instinctively from the modern West. At the turn of the twentieth century, every single leading Muslim intellectual, with the exception of the Iranian ideologue Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1839-97), was in love with the West, recognized it at a profound level, and wanted his country to look just like Britain and France." Muhammad Abdu (1849-1905), grand mufti of Egypt, hated the British occupation of his country, but he felt entirely at home with Western culture, had studied the modern sciences, and read Guizot, Tolstoy, Renan,

Strauss, and Herbert Spencer. After a trip to France, he is said to have made this deliberately provocative statement: "In Paris, I saw Islam but no Muslims; in Egypt, I see Muslims but no Islam." His point was that their modernized economies had enabled Europeans to promote conditions of justice and equity that came closer to the spirit of the Qur'an than was possible in a partially modernized society. At about the same time in Iran, leading mullahs campaigned alongside secular intellectuals for representational government and constitutional rule. After the Constitutional Revolution of 1906, they got their parliament, but two years later the British discovered oil in Iran and had no intention of allowing the parliament to scupper their plans to use this oil to fuel the British navy. Yet immediately after the revolution, hopes were high. In his *Admonition to the Nation and Exposition to the People* (1909), Sheikh Muhammad Husain Naini (1850-1936) argued that representative government was the next best thing to the coming of the Hidden Imam, the Shiite Messiah who would inaugurate a role of justice and equity in the last days. The constitution would limit the tyranny of the shah and should therefore be endorsed by every Muslim.⁸

It is important to emphasize this early enthusiasm for modernity, because too many Westerners regard Islam as inherently fundamentalist, atavistically opposed to democracy and freedom, and chronically addicted to violence. But Islam was the last of the three monotheisms to develop a fundamentalist strain; it did not do so until the late 1960s, after the Arabs' catastrophic defeat by Israel in the Six Day War of 1967, when the Western ideologies of nationalism and socialism, which had little grassroots support, appeared to have failed. Religion seemed a way of returning to the pre-colonial roots of their culture and regaining a more authentic identity. Western foreign policy has also hastened the rise of fundamentalism in the Middle East. The coup⁹ organized by the CIA and British Intelligence in Iran (1953) that displaced the nationalist, secular ruler Muhammad Mosaddeq (1880-1967) and put the exiled shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi (1878-1944) back on the throne left Iranians with a sense of bitter humiliation, betrayal, and impotence. The failure of the international community to alleviate the plight of the Palestinians has led others to despair of a conventional political solution. Western support for such rulers as the shah and Saddam Hussein, who denied their people basic human rights, has also tarnished the democratic ideal, since the West seemed proudly to proclaim its belief in freedom while inflicting dictatorial regimes on others. It has also helped to radicalize Islam, since the mosque was often the only place where people could express their discontent.

The rapid secularization of some of these countries has often taken the form of an assault on religion. In Europe and the United States, secularism developed gradually over a long period, and the new ideas and institutions had time to trickle down naturally to all members of the population. But many Muslim countries had to adopt the Western model in a mere fifty years or so. When Kemal Ataturk (1881-1938) secularized Turkey, he closed down all the madrassas and abolished the Sufi orders. The shahs made their soldiers go through the streets tearing off women's veils with their bayonets and ripping them to pieces. These reformers wanted their countries to *look* modern, even though only a small elite sector was familiar with the Western ethos. In 1935, Shah Reza Pahlavi ordered his soldiers to shoot at a crowd of unarmed demonstrators who were peacefully protesting against obligatory Western dress in Mashhad, one of the holiest shrines in Iran. Hundreds of Iranians died that day. In such a context, secularism does not appear a liberating option.

Sunni fundamentalism developed in the concentration camps in which President Gamal Abdel

Nasser (1918-70) interred thousands of members of the Muslim Brotherhood without trial. Many of them had done nothing more incriminating than handing out leaflets or attending a meeting. In these vile prisons they were subjected to mental and physical torture and became radicalized." Sayyid Qutb (1906-66) entered the camp as a moderate, but as a result of his imprisonment-he was tortured and finally executed-he evolved an ideology that is still followed by Islamists today." When he heard Nasser vowing to confine Islam to the private sphere, secularism did not seem benign. In his landmark book *Milestones*, we see the paranoid vision of the fundamentalist who has been pushed too far: Jews, Christians, communists, capitalists, and imperialists were all in league against Islam. Muslims had a duty to fight against the barbarism (*jahiliyyah*) of their day, starting with so-called Muslim rulers like Nasser.

This was an entirely new idea. In making *jihad*, understood as armed conflict, central to the Islamic vision, Qutb had distorted the faith that he was trying to defend. He was not the first to do so; he had been influenced by the writings of the Pakistani journalist and politician Abu Ala Mawdudi (1903-79), who feared the effects of Western imperialism in the Muslim world. **II** In order to survive, Mawdudi believed, Muslims must be prepared for revolutionary struggle. This *jihad* could take many forms: some would fight with the pen, others would engage in politics, but in the last resort every able-bodied Muslim must be prepared for war. No major Muslim thinker had ever made "holy war" a central tenet of the faith before; Mawdudi was well aware that he was making a highly controversial claim but was convinced that this radical innovation was justified by the present political emergency. Qutb took the same view: when asked how he could reconcile his hard line with the emphatic warning in the Qur'an that there must be no compulsion in matters of religion," he explained that Qur'anic tolerance was impossible when Muslims were subjected to such violence and cruelty. There could be toleration only *after* the political victory of Islam and the establishment of a truly Muslim *ummah*. 13

This *jihadi* ideology was not returning to the "fundamental" ideas of Islam, even though Qutb in particular based his revolutionary program on a distorted version of the life of Muhammad. He was preaching an Islamic liberation theology similar to that adopted by Catholics fighting brutal regimes in Latin America. Because God alone was sovereign, no Muslim was obliged to obey any ruler who contravened the Qur'anic demand for justice and equity. In rather the same way, when the revolutionary Iranian leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1902-89) declared that only a *faqih*, a cleric versed in Islamic jurisprudence, should be head of state, he was breaking with centuries of Shiite tradition, which since the eighth century had separated religion and politics as a matter of sacred principle. It was as shocking to some Shiite sensibilities as if the pope should abolish the Mass. But after decades of secularism as interpreted by the shahs, Khomeini believed that this was the only possible way forward. Khomeini also preached a modern third-world theology of liberation. Islam, he declared, was "the religion of militant individuals who are committed to freedom and independence. It is the school of those who struggle against imperialism.:"

Many forms of what we call "fundamentalism" should be seen as essentially political discourse-a religiously articulated form of nationalism or ethnicity. This is clearly true of Zionist fundamentalism in Israel, where extremists have advocated the forcible deportation of Arabs and the illegal settlement of territories occupied during the 1967 war. On February 25, 1994, Baruch Goldstein, a follower of the late Rabbi Meir Kahane, who had advocated the expulsion of Arabs

from Israel, shot twenty-nine Palestinian worshippers in the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron; and on November 4, 1995, Yigal Amir, a religious Zionist, assassinated Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin for signing the Oslo Accords. Islamic fundamentalism is also politically motivated. The Palestinian party Hamas began as a resistance movement, and developed only after the secular policies of Yassir Arafat and his party, Fatah, appeared to have become both ineffective and corrupt. Hamas's reprehensible killing of Israeli civilians is politically rather than religiously inspired, and its goals are limited. Hamas is not attempting to force the entire world to submit to Islam, has no global outreach, and targets only Israelis. Any military occupation is likely to breed resistance, and when an occupation has lasted for over forty years, this resistance is likely to take a violent form.

Critics of Islam believe that the cult of murderous martyrdom is endemic in the religion itself. This is not the case. Apart from the brief incident of the so-called assassin movement at the time of the Crusades-for which the Ismaili sect responsible was universally reviled in the Muslim world-it has not been a feature of Islamic history until modern times. The American scholar Robert Pape has made a careful study of suicide attacks between 1980 and 2004, including the al-Qaeda atrocities of September 11, 2001, and concluded:

Overwhelmingly suicide-terrorist attacks are not driven by religion as much as they are by a clear strategic objective: to compel modern democracies to withdraw military forces from the territory that the terrorists view as their homeland. From Lebanon to Sri Lanka, to Chechnya to Kashmir, to the West Bank, every major suicide-terrorist campaign-more than 95 percent of all the incidents-has had as its major objective to compel a democratic state to withdraw.

Osama Bin Laden, for example, cited the presence of American troops in his native Saudi Arabia and the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land high on his list of complaints against the West.

Terrorism undoubtedly threatens our global security, but we need accurate intelligence that takes all the evidence into account. It will not help to utter sweeping and ill-founded condemnations of "Islam." In a recent Gallup poll, only 7 percent of the Muslims interviewed in thirty-five countries believed that the 9/11 attacks were justified. They had no intention of committing such an atrocity themselves, but they believed that Western foreign policy had been largely responsible for these heinous actions. Their reasoning was entirely political: they cited such ongoing problems as Palestine, Kashmir, Chechnya, and Western interference in the internal affairs of Muslim countries. But the majority of Muslims who condemned the attacks all gave religious reasons, quoting, for example, the Qur'anic verse that states that the taking of a single life is equivalent to the destruction of the entire world.¹⁶

Since 9/11, Western politicians have assumed that Muslims hate "our way of life, our democracy, freedom, and success." But when asked what they most admired about the West, the politically radicalized and the moderates both listed Western technology; the Western ethic of hard work, personal responsibility, and the rule of law; as well as Western democracy, respect for human rights, freedom of speech, and gender equality. And, interestingly, a significantly higher percentage of the politically radicalized (50 percent versus 35 percent of moderates) replied that "moving toward greater governmental democracy would foster progress in the Arab/Muslim world." Finally, when asked what they resented most about the West, its "disrespect for Islam" ranked high on the list of both the politically radicalized and the moderates.

Most see the West as inherently intolerant: only 12 percent of radicals and 17 percent of moderates associated "respecting Islamic values" with Western nations. What could Muslims do to improve relations with the West? Again, among the top responses from both radicals and the moderates was "improve the presentation of Islam to the West, present Islamic values in a positive manner.,¹⁸ There are 1.3 billion Muslims in the world today; if the 7 percent (9¹ million) of the politically radicalized continue to feel politically dominated, occupied, and culturally and religiously disrespected, the West will have little chance of changing their hearts and minds.¹⁹ Blaming Islam is a simple but counterproductive answer; it is far less challenging than examining the political issues and grievances that resonate in so much of the Muslim world.

A form of secular fundamentalism has recently developed in the Western world that in style and strategy is similar to the atheism of Vogt, Buchner, and Haeckel. While physicists have felt comfortable with the unknowing that seems to be an essential component of intellectual advance, some biologists, whose discipline has not yet experienced a major reversal, have remained confident of their capacity to discover absolute truth and some, abandoning the agnostic restraint of Darwin and Huxley, have started to preach a militant form of atheism. In 1972, the French biochemist Jacques Monod (1910-76), Nobel Prize winner and professor of molecular biology at the College de France, published *Chance and Necessity*, which argued for the absolute incompatibility of theism and evolutionary theory. Change is the result of chance and is propagated by necessity. It is therefore impossible to speak of purpose and design in the universe: we must accept the fact that we humans have come into being by accident; that there is no benign Creator, no divine Friend that shapes our lives and values; and that we are alone in the immense and impersonal cosmos. Like Clifford, Monod maintained that it was not only intellectually but also *morally* wrong to accept any ideas that were not scientifically verifiable. But he admitted that there was no way of proving that this ideal of objectivity was in fact true: it was an ideal that was essentially arbitrary, a claim for which there was insufficient evidence." He thus tacitly admitted that even the scientific quest began with an act of faith.

Monod's ideas were not always accessible to those not steeped in French culture, and some of the first popular expositions of the implications of evolution in the English-speaking world were written, with great brilliance and clarity, by the Oxford biologist Richard Dawkins. In *The Blind Watchmaker* (1986), he explained that while Paley's argument for an Intelligent Designer had been perfectly acceptable in the early nineteenth century, Darwin had shown that the *appearance* of design occurred quite naturally in the process of evolutionary development. The "Blind Watchmaker" was natural selection, a blind, purposeless process that could not plan intelligently; nor could it deliberately produce the "contrivance" that Paley had found in nature. For Dawkins, atheism is a necessary consequence of evolution. He has argued that the religious impulse is simply an evolutionary mistake, a "misfiring of something useful"; it is a kind of virus, parasitic on cognitive systems naturally selected because they had enabled a species to survive.

Dawkins is an extreme exponent of the scientific naturalism, originally formulated by d'Holbach, that has now become a major worldview among intellectuals. More moderate versions of this "scientism" have been articulated by Carl Sagan, Steven Weinberg, and Daniel Dennett, who have all claimed that one has to choose between science and faith. For Dennett,

theology has been rendered superfluous, because biology can provide a better explanation of why people are religious. But for Dawkins, like the other "new atheists"-Sam Harris, the young American philosopher and student of neuroscience, and Christopher Hitchens, critic and journalist-religion is the cause of all the problems of our world; it is the source of absolute evil and "poisons everything.": They see themselves in the vanguard of a scientific/rational movement that will eventually expunge the idea of God from human consciousness.

But other atheists and scientists are wary of this approach. The American zoologist Stephen Jay Gould (1941-2002) followed Monod in his discussion of the implications of evolution. Everything in the natural world could indeed be explained by natural selection, but Gould insisted that science was not competent to decide whether God did or did not exist, because it could work only with natural explanations. Gould had no religious ax to grind; he described himself as an atheistically inclined agnostic but pointed out that Darwin himself had denied he was an atheist and that other eminent Darwinians Asa Gray, Charles D. Walcott, G. G. Simpson, and Theodosius Dobzhansky had been either practicing Christians or agnostics. Atheism did not, therefore, seem to be a necessary consequence of

accepting evolutionary theory, and Darwinians who held forth dogmatically on the subject were stepping beyond the limitations that were proper to science.

Gould also revived, in new form, the ancient distinction and complementarity of *mythos* and *logos* in what he called NOMA (NonOverlapping Magisteria). A "magisterium," he explained, was "a domain where one form

of teaching holds the appropriate tools for meaningful discourse and resolution. Religion and science were separate magisteria and should not encroach on each other's domain:

The magisterium of science covers the empirical realm: what is the universe made of (fact) and why does it work this way (theory)? The magisterium of religion extends over questions of ultimate meaning and moral value. These two magisteria do not overlap, nor do they encompass all inquiry."

The idea of an inherent conflict between religion and science was false. They were two distinct magisteria that "hold equal worth and necessary status for any complete human life; and ... remain logically distinct and fully separate in lines of inquiry."

But the new atheists will have none of this, and in his somewhat immoderate way, Dawkins denounces Gould as a quisling. They adhere to a hard-line form of scientific naturalism that mirrors the fundamentalism on which they base their critique: atheism is always a rejection of and parasitically dependent on a particular form of theism. The work of the new atheists has been exhaustively criticized, notably by John F. Haught, Alister McGrath, and John Cornwell.²⁶ Like all religious fundamentalists, the new atheists believe that they alone are in possession of truth; like Christian fundamentalists, they read scripture in an entirely literal manner and seem never to have heard of the long tradition of allegoric or Talmudic interpretation or indeed of the Higher Criticism. Harris seems to imagine that biblical inspiration means that the Bible was actually "written by God."²⁷ Hitchens assumes that faith is entirely dependent upon a literal reading of the Bible, and that, for example, the discrepancies in the gospel infancy narratives

prove the falsity of Christianity: "Either the gospels are in some sense literal truth, or the whole thing is essentially a fraud and perhaps a moral one at that."²⁸ Like Protestant fundamentalists, Dawkins has a simplistic view of the moral teaching of the Bible, taking it for granted that its chief purpose is to issue clear rules of conduct and provide us with "role models," which, not surprisingly, he finds lamentably inadequate." He also presumes that since the Bible claims to be inspired by God it must also provide scientific information. Dawkins's only point of disagreement with the Protestant fundamentalists is that he finds the Bible unreliable about science while they do not.

It is not surprising that Dawkins is incensed with American creationists who are campaigning against the teaching of evolution, and the proponents of a new, quasi-scientific philosophy that has tried to revive the theory of intelligent design (ID). These include Philip E. Johnson, professor of law at Berkeley and author of *Darwin on Trial* (1991); the biochemist Michael Behe, author of *Darwin's Black Box* (1996); and the philosopher William Dembski, author of *The Design Inference* (1998). These theists do not all posit God as the Designer, but they do argue that ID is a viable alternative to Darwinism and cite a supernatural agency in creation as if it were scientific evidence. But as Dennett points out, the ID theorists have not devised any experiments or made any empirical observations that challenge modern evolutionary thinking. ID, he concludes, is therefore not science." ID is also theologically incorrect to make scientific statements. *Mythos* and *logos* have different fields of competence, and, as we have seen, when they are confused you have bad science and inadequate religion. But while Dawkins's irritation with creationists and ID theorists is understandable, he is not correct to assume that fundamentalist belief either represents or is even typical of either Christianity or religion as a whole.

This type of reductionism is characteristic of the fundamentalist mentality. It is also essential to the critique of Dawkins, Hitchens, and Harris to present fundamentalism as the focal core of the three monotheisms. They have an extremely literalist notion of God. For Dawkins, religious faith rests on the idea that "*there exists a superhuman, supernatural intelligence, who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it.*" Having set up this definition of God as Supernatural Designer, Dawkins only has to point out that there is in fact no design in nature in order to demolish it. But he is mistaken to assume that this is "the way people have generally understood the term" God. He is also wrong to claim that God is a scientific hypothesis, that is, a conceptual framework for bringing intelligibility to a series of experiments and observations. It was only in the modern period that theologians started to treat God as a scientific explanation and in the process produced an idolatrous God concept.

The new atheists all equate faith with mindless credulity. Harris wrote *The End of Faith* immediately after 9/11, insisting that the only way to rid our world of terrorism was to abolish all faith. Like Dawkins and Hitchens, he defines faith as "Belief without Evidence,"³⁴ an attitude that he regards as morally reprehensible. It is not surprising, perhaps, that he should confuse "faith" with "belief" (meaning the intellectual acceptance of a proposition) because the two have become unfortunately fused in modern consciousness. But like other atheists and agnostics before him, Harris goes on to declare that faith is the root of all evil. A belief might *seem* innocent enough, but once you have blindly accepted the dogma that Jesus "can be eaten in the form of a cracker,"³⁵ you have made a space in your mind for other monstrous fictions: that God desires the destruction of Israel, the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians, or the 9/11 massacres.

Everybody must stop believing in anything that cannot be verified by the empirical methods of science. It is not enough to get rid of extremists, fundamentalists, and terrorists. "Moderate" believers are equally guilty of the "inherently dangerous" crime of faith and must share responsibility for the terrorist atrocities.³⁶

Our civic toleration of faith must therefore be eliminated. "As long as we respect the principle that religious faith must be respected simply because it is real faith," Dawkins insists, "it is hard to withhold respect for Usama bin Laden and the suicide bombers." The obvious and self-evident alternative is to "abandon the principle of automatic respect for religious faith," because "the teachings of 'moderate religion,' though not extremist in themselves, are an open invitation to extremism."³⁷ This rejection of the Enlightenment principle of toleration is new. It is, surely, itself extremist. "The very idea of religious tolerance," Harris maintains, "is one of the principal forces driving us toward the abyss."³⁸ In this lack of tolerance, they are again at one with the religious fundamentalists, even though they must be aware that the absence of respect for difference has led to some of the worst atrocities in modern times. It is hard to hear talk of elimination without recalling the Nazi camp and the Gulag.

As its critics have already pointed out, there is an inherent contradiction in the new atheism, especially in its emphasis on the importance of "evidence" and the claim that science always proves its theories empirically. As Popper, Kuhn, and Polyani have argued, science itself has to rely on an act of faith. Even Monod acknowledged this. Dawkins's hero Darwin admitted that he could not prove the evolutionary hypothesis but he had confidence in it nonetheless, and for decades, as we have seen, physicists were happy to have faith in Einstein's theory of relativity, even though it had not been definitively verified. Even Harris makes a large act of faith in the ability of his own intelligence to arrive at objective truth—a claim that Hume or Kant would have found questionable.

All three of these proselytizing atheists present religion at its absolute worst. It is very important to remember the evils committed in the name of religion, and they are right to bring them to our attention. All too often, people of faith like to enumerate the sins of other traditions while ignoring the stains on their own. Christians, for example, are often eager to criticize Islam for its intolerance, showing not only an embarrassing ignorance of Muslim history but total myopia toward the crusades, persecutions, and inquisitions conducted by their own coreligionists. But claiming that religion has *only* been evil is inaccurate. Science is the child of *logos* and we should, therefore, be able to rely on scientists, with their finely honed reasoning powers, to sift the evidence in a balanced, impartial way. But Harris, for example, finds it quite acceptable to assert emphatically that "*most Muslims are utterly deranged by their religious faith*."³⁹ This type of remark is just as biased and untrue as some of the religious rhetoric he condemns.

It is also misleading to insist that all the problems of the modern world are entirely due to religion, if only because at this perilous moment in human history we need clear heads and accurate intelligence. At the beginning of his book, Dawkins asks us to imagine, with John Lennon, a world without religion.

Imagine no suicide bombers, no 9/11, no 7/7, no Crusades, no witch-hunts, no Gunpowder Plot, no Indian partition, no Israeli/Palestinian wars, no Serb/Croat! Muslim massacres, no persecution of Jews as "Christ killers," no Northern Ireland "troubles," no "honour killings," no shiny-suited bouffant-haired

televangelists fleecing gullible people of their money."

But not all these conflicts are wholly due to religion. The new atheists show a disturbing lack of understanding of or concern about the complexity and ambiguity of modern experience, and their polemic entirely fails to mention the concern for justice and compassion that, despite their undeniable failings, has been espoused by all three of the monotheisms.

Religious fundamentalists also develop an exaggerated view of their enemy as the epitome of evil. This makes the critique of the new atheists too easy. They never discuss the work of such theologians as Bultmann or Tillich, who offer a very different view of religion and are closer to mainstream tradition than any fundamentalist. Unlike Feuerbach, Marx, and Freud, the new atheists are not theologically literate. As one of their critics has remarked, in any military strategy it is essential to confront the enemy at its strongest point; failure to do so means that their polemic remains shallow and lacks intellectual

depth." It is also morally and intellectually conservative. Unlike Feuerbach, Marx, Ingersoll, or Mill, these new atheists show little concern about the poverty, injustice, and humiliation that have inspired many of the atrocities they deplore; they show no yearning for a better world. Nor, like Nietzsche, Sartre, or Camus, do they compel their readers to face up to the pointlessness and futility that ensue when people lack the means of creating a sense of meaning. They do not appear to consider the effect of such nihilism on people who do not have privileged lives and absorbing work.

Dawkins argues that we are moral beings because the virtuous behavior of our ancestors probably helped to ensure their survival. Altruism was, therefore, not divinely inspired but simply the result of an accidental genetic mutation that programmed our forebears to behave more generously and cooperatively than others. But, he continues, there are many such "blessed" evolutionary misfirings in human behavior, one of which is "the urge to kindness-to altruism, to generosity, to empathy, to pity."⁴² Many theologians would have no difficulty with this view. It is surely characteristic of our humanity to take something basic and instinctual and transform it in such a way that it transcends the purely pragmatic. Cooking, for example, probably began as a useful survival skill, but we have gone on to develop haute cuisine. We acquired the ability to run and jump in order to get away from predators, and now we have ballet and athletics. We cultivated language as a useful means of communication and have created poetry. The religious traditions have done something similar with altruism. As Confucius pointed out, they have found that when they practiced it "all day and every day," it elevated human life to the realm of holiness and gave practitioners intimations of transcendence.

In the past, theologians have found it useful to have an exchange of views with atheists. The ideas of the Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) were enhanced by the writings of Feuerbach; Bultmann, Tillich, and Rahner were all influenced by Heidegger.⁴³ But it is difficult to see how theologians could dialogue fruitfully with Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens because their theology is so rudimentary. We should, however, take careful note of what we might call the Dawkins phenomenon. The fact that these intemperate antireligious tracts have won such wide readership not only in secular Europe but also in religious America suggests that many people who have little theological training have problems with the modern God. Some believers are still able to work creatively with this

symbol, but others are obviously not. They get little help from their clergy, who may not have had an advanced theological training and whose world view may still be bounded by the modern God. Modern theology is not always easy reading. Theologians should try to present it in an attractive, accessible way to enable congregants to keep up with the latest discussions and the new insights of biblical scholarship, which rarely reach the pews.

Our world is already dangerously polarized, and we do not need another divisive ideology. The history of fundamentalism shows that when these movements are attacked, they nearly always become more extreme. The atheist assault is likely to drive the fundamentalists to even greater commitment to creationism, and their contemptuous dismissal of Islam is a gift to Muslim extremists, who can use it to argue that the West is indeed intent on a new Crusade."

Typical of the fundamentalist mind-set is the belief that there is only one way of interpreting reality. For the new atheists, scientism alone can lead us to truth. But science depends upon faith, intuition, and aesthetic vision as well as on reason. The physicist Paul Dirac has argued that "it is more important to have beauty in one's equations than to have them fit experiment."⁴⁵ The mathematician Roger Penrose believes that the creative mind "breaks through" into a Platonic realm of mathematical and aesthetic forms: "Rigorous argument is usually the *last* step! Before that, one has to make many guesses, and for these aesthetic convictions are enormously important." There are many circumstances in which human beings have to lay aside an objectivist analysis, which seeks in some way to master what it contemplates. When confronted with a work of art, we have to open our minds and allow it to carry us away. If we seek to relate intimately to another person, we have to be prepared to make ourselves vulnerable—as Abraham did when he opened his heart and home to the three strangers at Mamre.

As Tillich pointed out, men and women continually feel drawn to explore levels of truth that go beyond our normal experience. This imperative has inspired the scientific as well as the religious quest. We seek what Tillich called an "ultimate concern" that shapes our life and gives it meaning. The ultimate concern of Dawkins and Harris appears to be reason; this has seized and taken possession of them. But their idea of reason is very different from the rationality of Socrates, who used his reasoning powers to bring his dialogue partners into a state of unknowing. For Augustine and Aquinas, reason became *intellectus*, opening naturally to the divine. Today, for many people, reason no longer subverts itself in this way. But the danger of this secularization of reason, which denies the possibility of transcendence, is that reason can become an idol that seeks to destroy all rival claimants. We hear this in the new atheism, which has forgotten that unknowing is a part of the human condition, so much so that, as the social critic Robert N. Bellah has pointed out: "Those who feel they are ... most fully objective in their assessment of reality are most in the power of deep, unconscious fantasies."⁴⁸

Modern physicists, as we have seen, are not wary of unknowing: their experience of living with apparently insoluble problems evokes awe and wonder. In the 1970s, string theory became the Holy Grail of science, the final theory that would unify force and matter in a model integrating gravity and quantum mechanics. There is some skepticism about string theory: Richard Feynman, for example, dismissed it as "crazy nonsense,"⁴⁹ but some string theorists have admitted that their discoveries cannot be either proven or refuted experimentally and have

even claimed that no adequate experiment can be devised to test what is a mathematical explanation of the universe." The wonder of modern cosmology seems derived in no small measure from the physicists' inherent inability to answer all its questions.>' They know that the terms they use to describe these natural mysteries-big bang, dark matter, black holes, dark energy-are metaphors that cannot adequately translate their mathematical insights into words. Unlike Newton, of course, modern physicists are not introducing God or the supernatural into their cosmos. But the obviously mythical character of these terms is a reminder that what they point to is not readily comprehensible; they are straining at the limits of scientific investigation, and these terms should carry an air of mystery because they name what cannot yet be investigated.

Today many physicists sense that they are on the brink of another major paradigm shift.>' Even Stephen Hawking is no longer so certain that a theory of everything, which will enable humans to look into the "mind of God," is readily available. They have learned that what seemed incontrovertible could be replaced overnight by an entirely different scientific model, and are at home with unknowing. Thus the cosmologist Paul Davies speaks of his delight in science with its unanswered and, perhaps, unanswerable questions:

Why did we come to exist 13.7 billion years ago in a Big Bang? Why are the laws of electromagnetism or gravitation as they are? Why these laws? What are we doing here? And, in particular, how come we are able to understand the world? Why is it that we're equipped with intellects that can unpick all this wonderful cosmic order and make sense of it? It's truly astonishing.

Davies has confessed: "It may seem bizarre, but in my opinion, science offers a surer path to God than religion."⁵⁴ He is still asking the primordial question: Why is there something rather than nothing? Modern physicists have more information than our ancestors could have dreamed of, but unlike Dawkins, they do not all dismiss this query as redundant or pointless. Human beings seem framed to pose problems for themselves that they cannot solve, pit themselves against the dark world of an created reality, and find that living with such unknowing is a source of astonishment and delight.

Philosophy, theology, and mythology have always responded to the science of the day, and a philosophical movement has developed since the 1980s that has embraced the indeterminacy of the new cosmology. Postmodern thinking is heir to Hume and Kant in its assumption that what we call reality is constructed by the mind and that all human understanding is therefore interpretation rather than the acquisition of accurate, objective information. From this it follows that no single vision can be sovereign; that our knowledge is relative, subjective, and fallible rather than certain and absolute; and that truth is inherently ambiguous. Received ideas that are the products of a particular historical and cultural milieu must, therefore, be stringently deconstructed. But this analysis must not be based on any absolute principle, and there is no assurance that we will ever arrive at-or even approximate-a wholly accurate version of the truth. Fundamental to postmodern thought is the conviction that instead of ideologies mirroring external conditions, the world is profoundly affected by the ideology that human beings impose upon it. We are not forced by sense data to adopt a particular worldview, so we have a choice in what we affirm-as well as an immense responsibility.

Postmodernists are particularly suspicious of Big Stories. They regard Western history as scarred by the ceaseless compulsion to impose a totalizing system on the world. Sometimes this has been theological and has resulted in crusade and persecution, but the "stories" have also been scientific, economic, ideological, and political, resulting in the technological domination of nature and the sociopolitical subjection of others in slavery, genocide, colonialism, anti-Semitism, and the oppression of women and other minorities. So, like Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx, postmodernists seek to deflate such beliefs but without attempting to substitute an absolute "story" of their own. Postmodernism is iconoclastic, therefore. As one of its early luminaries, Jean-Francois Lyotard (1924-98), explained, it can be defined as "the incredulity towards grand narratives (*grands recits*)." Top of the list of such *recits* is the modern "God," who is omnipotent and omniscient and keeps watch over the world, working all things to his own purposes. But postmodernism is also averse to an atheism that makes absolute, totalistic claims. As Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) cautioned, we must also be alert to "theological prejudices" not only in religious contexts, where they are overt, but in all metaphysics-even those that profess to be atheist. 55 Like any postmodern philosopher, Derrida was deeply suspicious of the fixed, binary polarities that characterize modern thought, and the atheist/theist divide was, he believed, too simple. Atheists have reduced the complex phenomena of religion to formulas that suit their own ideologies-as Marx did when he called religion an opiate of the oppressed or Freud when he saw it as oedipal terror. A fixed and final denial of God on metaphysical grounds was for Derrida as culpable as any dogmatic religious "theology" (his term for a *grand recit*). Derrida himself, a secularized Jew, said that though he might pass for an atheist, he prayed all the time, had a messianic hope for a better world, and inclined to the view that, since no absolute certainty is within our grasp, we should for the sake of peace hesitate to make declarative statements of either belief or unbelief.

Some orthodox believers and most fundamentalists will be repelled by this unabashed relativism, but there are aspects of Derrida's thought that recall earlier theological attitudes. His theory of deconstruction, which denies the possibility of finding a single, secure meaning in any text, is positively rabbinical. He has also been called a "negative" theologian and was greatly interested in Eckhart. What he called *differance* is neither a word nor a concept but a quasi-transcendental possibility-a "difference" or "otherness"-that lies within a word or idea such as "God." For Eckhart, this *differance* was the God beyond God, a new but unknowable metaphysical ground that was inseparable from the human self. But for Derrida, *differance* was only quasi-transcendental; it is a potential, something that we cannot see but that makes us aware that we may have to qualify or even unsay anything we say or deny of God.

In his later work, Derrida seemed haunted by the potential and lure of an open future. He affirmed what he calls the "undeconstructible," which is not another absolute, because it does not exist, and yet we weep and pray for it. As he explained in his lecture "The Force of Law" (1989), justice is an undeconstructible "something" that is never fully realized in the actual circumstances of daily life but that informs all legal speculation. Justice is not what exists; it is what we desire. It calls us; it seems sometimes within our grasp but ultimately eludes us. And yet we go on trying to incarnate it in our legal systems. Derrida later went on to discuss other "undeconstructibles": gift, forgiveness, and friendship. He loved to talk of the "democracy to come": we yearn for democracy but we never fully achieve it; it remains an incessant hope for the future. And in the same way, "God," a term often used in the past to set a limit to human

thought and endeavor, becomes for the postmodern philosopher the desire beyond desire, a memory and a promise that is, by its very nature, indefinable.

Some postmodern thinkers have applied these ideas to theology.

Significantly, they are usually philosophers rather than theologians. Reversing the trend begun by such philosophes as Diderot, d'Holbach, and Freud, their interest heralds a change in the intellectual atmosphere of academe. At the time of the Death of God movement in the 1960s, God's days seemed numbered, but now God seems alive and well. Postmodern theology challenges the assumption that secularism is irreversible; some have suggested that we are now entering a "postsecular" age but have also made it clear that the religion being revitalized must be different from "modern" faith. The first to apply Derrida's ideas to theology was Mark C. Taylor in *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* (1984); the slash in the subtitle was designed to mark a Derridian hesitation before settling for either God or Godlessness. Taylor saw a link between deconstruction and the 1960s Death of God movement, but criticized Altizer for being stuck in the modern dialectic in which things were either dead or alive, absent or present. In his view, religion was present even when it seemed absent-so much so that he was criticized for allowing religion in his later work to be entirely swallowed up in other discourses.

Those philosophers who focused on Derrida's later work have been more successful. The Italian postmodernist Gianni Vattimo argues that from the very first religion had recognized that it was an essentially interpretive discourse: it had traditionally proceeded by endlessly deconstructing its sacred texts, so that from the start it had the potential to liberate itself from metaphysical orthodoxy. Vattimo is anxious to promote what is called "weak thought" to counter the aggressively triumphalist certainty that characterizes a good deal of modern religion and atheism. Metaphysics is dangerous because it makes absolute claims for either God or reason. "Not all metaphysics have been violent," Vattimo admits, "but all violent people of great dimensions have been metaphysical." Hitler, for example, was not content to hate only the Jews in his vicinity but created a *grand recit* that made metaphysical claims about Jews in general. "When someone wants to tell me the absolute truth," Vattimo remarks shrewdly, "it is because he wants to put me under his control."⁵⁷ Both theism and atheism make such claims, but there are no absolute truths anymore--only interpretations.

Modernity, Vattimo believes, is over; when we contemplate history, we cannot now see the future as an inevitable and unilinear progression toward emancipation. Freedom no longer lies in the perfect knowledge of and conformity to the necessary structure of reality, but in an appreciation of multiple discourses and the historicity, contingency, and finitude of all religious, ethical, and political values including our own. ⁵⁹ Vattimo wants to bring down "walls," including the walls that separate theists and atheists. Even though he believes that society will reembrace religion, he does not want to abandon secularization, because he regards the Church-state alliance set up by Constantine as a Christian aberration. The ideal society should be based on charity rather than truth. In the past, Vattimo recalls, religious truth generally emerged from people interacting with others rather than by papal edict. Vattimo recalls Christ's saying "When two or three are gathered together in my name, I will be in the midst of them," and the classic hymn "Where there is love, there is also God.

The American philosopher John D. Caputo has been influenced by Heidegger and the postmodern thinker Gilles Deleuze (1925-95) as well as by Derrida. He too advocates "weak thought" and transcendence of the warring polarities of atheism and theism. He sees the

limitations of the old Death of God movement but fully endorses the desire of Altizer and Van Buren to deconstruct the modern God. Although he appreciates Tillich's emphasis on the essentially symbolic nature of religious truth, he is, however, wary of calling God the "ground of being," since this sets brakes on the process of endless flux and becoming that is essential to life by stabilizing a grounding center of our being.?' Atheist and theist alike should abandon the modern appetite for certainty. One of the problems of the original Death of God movement was that its terminology was too final and absolute. No state of affairs is permanent, and we are now witnessing the death of the Death of God. The atheistic ideas of Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud are "perspectives ... constructions, and fictions of grammar."

Enlightenment secularism, the objectivist reduction of religion to something other than itself-say, to a distorted desire for one's mommy, or to a way of keeping the ruling authorities in power-is one more story told by people with historically limited imaginations, with contingent conceptions of reason and history, of economics with labour, of nature and human nature, of desire, sexuality, and women, and of God, religion, and faith.⁶²

The Enlightenment had its own rigors. Postmodernity should be "a more enlightened Enlightenment, that is, no longer taken in by the dream of Pure Objectivity." It should open doors "to another way of thinking about faith and reason" in order to achieve "a redescription of reason that is more reasonable than the transhistorical Rationality of the Enlightenment."

So how does Caputo see God? Following Derrida, he would describe God as the desire beyond desire." Of its very nature, desire is located in the space between what exists and what does not; it addresses all that we are and are not, everything we know and what we do not know. The question is not "Does God exist?" any more than "Does desire exist?" The question is rather "What do we desire?" Augustine understood this when he asked, "What do I love when I love my God?" and failed to find an answer. Like Denys and Aquinas, Caputo does not see negative theology as a deeper, more authoritative truth. It simply emphasizes unknowing-"in the sense that we really don't know! For Caputo, "religious truth is truth without knowledge? He has adapted Derrida's *differance* to create his "theology of the event," distinguishing between a *name*, such as

"God" "Justice" or "Democracy, and what he calls the event, that which is "astir" in that name, something that is never fully realized. But the "event" within the name inspires us, turns things upside down, making us weep and pray for what is "to come."

The name is a kind of provisional formulation of an event, a relatively stable, if evolving structure, while the event is ever restless, on the move, seeking new forms to assume, seeking to get expressed in still unexpressed ways.⁶⁸

We pray for what is "to come," not for what already exists. The "event" does not require "belief" in a static, unchanging deity who "exists" but inspires us to make what is "astir" in the name "God" "absolute beauty, peace, justice, and selfless love-a reality in the world.

Religion as described by these postmodern philosophers may sound alien to much "modern" religion, but it evokes many of the insights of the past. Both Vattimo and Caputo insist that these are primordial, perennial ideas with a long pedigree. Vattimo's claim that religion is essentially

interpretive recalls the maxim of the rabbis:

"What is Torah? It is the interpretation of Torah." When he affirms the primacy of charity and the communal nature of religious truth, we recall the rabbis' repeated insistence that "when two or three study Torah together, the Shekhinah is in their midst," the story of Emmaus, and the communal experience of liturgy. Caputo also sees Anselm's "ontological proof" as "autodeconstructive":

Whatever it is you say God is, God is more. The very constitution of the idea is deconstructive of any such construction ... the very formula that describes God is that there is no formula with which God can be described?

When Caputo argues that the "event" requires a response rather than "belief," he echoes the rabbis' definition of scripture as *miqra*, a summons to action.

Above all, both Caputo and Vattimo stress the importance of the apophatic. All these perceptions that were once central to religion tended to be submerged in the positivist discourse of modernity, and the fact that they have surfaced again in a different form suggests that this type of "unknowing" is inherent in our very humanity. The distinctively modern yearning for purely notional, absolute, and empirically proven truth may have been an aberration. Caputo himself suggests as much. Noting that atheism is always a rejection of a particular conception of the divine, he concludes: "If modern atheism is the rejection of a modern God, then the delimitation of modernity opens up another possibility, less the resuscitation of premodern theism than the chance of something beyond both the theism and the atheism of modernity. "⁷⁰

It is an enticing prospect. If atheism was a product of modernity, now that we are entering a "postmodern" phase, will this too, like the modern God, become a thing of the past? Will the growing appreciation of the limitations of human knowledge—which is just as much a part of the contemporary intellectual scene as atheistic certainty give rise to a new kind of apophatic theology? And how best can we move beyond premodern theism into a perception of "God" that truly speaks to all the complex realities and needs of our time?

END OF CHAPTER: DEATH OF GOD

Armstrong: Reviews of The Case for God: (1) Karen Armstrong is able to do two things which are individually remarkable, and in combination perhaps unique.

- provide a credible, erudite, historical overview of all the main religions in a way that shows how they fit together. ie. the key ideas they have borrowed from each other
- do so in a way which is vivid, accessible and often inspiring.

the God Armstrong is arguing for is not Some religious readers will be shocked to discover that "their" religion is based on ideas that are far more widespread than they may have realized. And they may be uncomfortable that one actively involved in day-to-day human concerns, checking off prayer requests or directing the weather, but deeper, mysterious, perhaps ineffable. Some non-religious readers will be shocked by how compelling a case **Armstrong makes for a religious mindset based, not so much on "belief" or "faith" but on spirituality and**

compassion. But all, if they approach this book with an open mind, are likely to emerge with a richer understanding of life's most important questions

Review: (2) **An Intellectual Feast But in the End Very Little Help to the World's Problems:** In this astounding book, prolific author Karen Armstrong has written an intellectual history of the notion of God down through the centuries, focusing on our western Christian conceptions. In many ways her book covers much of the same territory that Robert Wright did in [The Evolution of God](#), which I reviewed on Amazon. But whereas Wright focuses on the evolution of morality in conceptions of the divine, Armstrong focuses on the practice of religion itself.

I was astonished as time after time she got so many things right in those areas I knew something about. This is an amply documented massive book which cannot be rehearsed in any detail in this short review. But it is an intellectual feast. If you want to be brought up to speed to today's world on the subject of religion in the western world, this book may be the only one you need. From Paleolithic times to postmodern thinking it's all here for the most part. From the Hebrew God Yahweh, to the Greek "logos," to the rise of Christianity, the era of Constantine, the rise of Science, the Enlightenment down to the present day, she covers it all masterfully.

Her main concern throughout the book seems to be the rise of the religious fundamentalist phenomenon and the atheist backlash seen best in the so-called New Atheists like Harris, Dawkins, Dennett, and Hitchens. Against both sides she claims religion is not a set of doctrines to be believed but rather something practiced in ritual and experienced through introspection, art, and music. As such, the New Atheists have not adequately debunked religion at all when they debunk the Bible, creationism, and/or religious ideas of the divine.

Christian fundamentalism according to her, "is in fact a defiantly unorthodox form of faith that frequently misrepresents the tradition it is trying to defend" (p. xvi). She argues: "Religion was a matter of doing rather than thinking" (p. 25). "Religious discourse was not intended to be understood literally because it was only possible to speak about a reality that transcended language in symbolic terms. The story of the lost paradise was a myth, not a factual account of a historical event" (p. 15). "Like any myth, its purpose is to help us to contemplate the human predicament" (p. 28). As such, the creation account "was emphatically not intended as a literal account of the physical origins of life" (p. 44). When it comes to Yahweh she argues, "There was no clear, consistent image of God in Genesis" (p. 35). Moreover, "Yahweh was simply one of the 'holy ones' in El's retinue" (p. 34). She challenges fundamentalists to therefore "face up to the implications of the Darwinian vision of nature `red in tooth and claw'" (p. 324). She argues that "if a biblical text appeared to contradict current scientific discoveries the exegete must interpret it differently" (p. 324).

With this understanding of fundamentalism she claims the New Atheist's "analysis is disappointingly shallow, because it is based on such poor theology" (p. xvi). "Religion," she

says, "was never supposed to provide answers to questions that lay within the reach of human reason...Religion's task, closely allied to that of art, was to help us to live creatively, peacefully, and even joyously with realities for which there were no easy explanations and problems that we could not solve; morality, pain, grief, despair, and outrage at the injustice and cruelty of life...Religion is a practical discipline" (p. 318). Just like the fundamentalists whom they argue against, Armstrong claims that "the new atheists believe that they alone are in possession of truth...they read scripture in an entirely literal manner and seem never to have heard of the long tradition of allegoric interpretation or indeed of Higher Criticism" (p. 303). Thus, Dawkins is "not correct to assume that fundamentalist belief either represents or is even typical of either Christianity or religion as a whole" (p. 304). And he "is also wrong to claim that God is a scientific hypothesis, that is, a conceptual framework for bringing intelligibility to a series of experiments and observations" (p. 305). All told, she shares the same kinds of criticisms of the New Atheists as liberal theologian John F. Haught does in his book [God and the New Atheism: A Critical Response to Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens](#), which I also reviewed on Amazon.

But her analysis is problematic on a number of fronts. When it comes to religion, Armstrong is placing her liberal theological grid on it backward through time. She's right about primitive religion. Their religion was in the rituals, the dances, the human/child/animal sacrifices, the chants, and the drum music. But somewhere along the evolutionary line, especially within Christianity, religious believers developed doctrinal beliefs too. We see them in the historic creeds of the church, a few of which are in the New Testament itself. If they hadn't done so then what can account for such things as the Inquisition, or the Thirty Years War between the Catholics and Protestants and between the Protestants themselves? This creedal development happened long before Christian fundamentalism arrived on the scene, by her own account! What she seems to misunderstand is that there is no "one size fits all" when it comes to religion. And so she cannot fault the New Atheists for attacking the fundamentalist religion of today's world since that's what religion is for many, many people.

Furthermore, her book uses the results of Higher Criticism, which is little more than the scientific method applied to historical texts like the Bible. She faults the New Atheists for treating God and religion as a scientific hypothesis but then turns around and uses that the same scientific method when deconstructing the Biblical texts. Can she really have it both ways? Even if she doesn't think the scientific method should be used to examine one's religion or concepts of the divine, she needs to articulate and defend an alternative method that can deliver the same kinds of results. What's the alternative for her? Introspection? Art? Music? What kind of method is that? Such a method would never have allowed her to come to the conclusions she's reached about religion in general, and of Christian fundamentalism in particular.

Suffice it for me to say that I find her religion-as-psychology metaphysically unfulfilling and deeply inadequate. Her god is a distant god and as such her god can be safely ignored as having

no relevance for one's life at all. She's practically an atheist. So rather than targeting the New Atheists who are promoting scientific thinking, denouncing religious violence, and proclaiming the follies of authoritarian fundamentalist faith, why doesn't she stand up with them against the fundamentalists who are the source of much, if not most, of the problems in this world?

Think of it this way. What does Armstrong fault the New Atheists for in comparison to the religious fundamentalists? Misunderstanding, at best? That's nothing in comparison to the problems that authoritarian fundamentalist faith produces in the world, and she knows this. She's nitpicking when there's a world that needs her help. After all, who really cares if the New Atheists are attacking what she doesn't consider representative of true religion or true Christianity? They are attacking a real threat to world peace regardless! And who really cares if religion doesn't poison everything as Hitchens proclaims? Religion causes a great deal of suffering.

I highly recommend Victor Stenger's latest book in response to criticism like hers, [The New Atheism: Taking a Stand for Science and Reason](#), which I also reviewed on Amazon. This is one of the New Atheists that Armstrong failed to mention. I'm the author of "Why I Became an Atheist," and the forthcoming edited book, "The Christian Delusion."