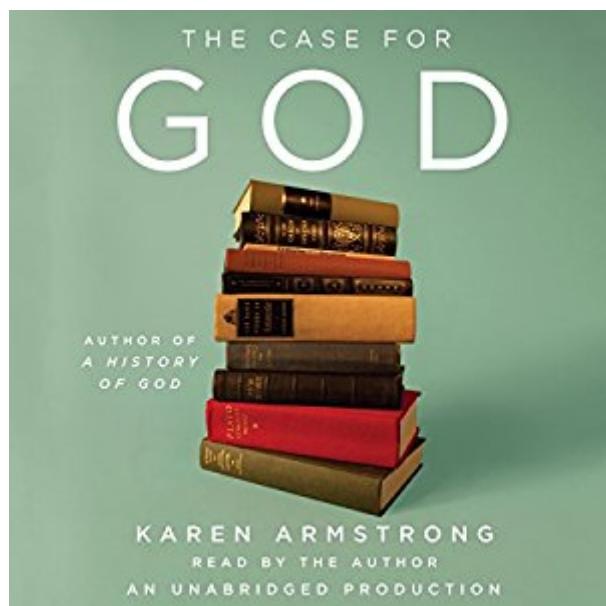


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The Case For God



Synopsis

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. 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 prison of selfhood.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Enter the caverns of Lascaux and step back into the world of our early hunter ancestors of the Paleolithic era. We find record of a people who took life and the taking of the life they hunted very seriously and recorded on the stone walls of the caverns their rites performed to return the animals they killed for sustenance to a second life. Enter another cave where Plato paints a picture of humanity groping in darkness until some are able to step out into the light, seeing the world for the first time are faint able to make those still in the darkness of the caves comprehend their new vision. Humanity has a history, a long encounter with the sacred. It is expressed in different ways such as God, Brahman, Nirvana, Allah, and Dao among others. With all the diverse manners of approaching it humanity has a long, intimate relationship with the transcendent and it is important for anyone to understand the religious impulse in order to understand a vital element of what it means to be human. Karen Armstrong provides a thorough and compelling resource toward this kind of understanding in her book "The Case for God". It is useful to know before reading this book that it is not a tract attempting to prove the existence of God. It is rather a case for God, not the existence of God. Amid the arguments made by New Atheists such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens, Armstrong makes the case that the religious life can be valuable and healthy.

I believe what Karen Armstrong is trying to do is refine the definition of God and to respect all the real life experiences of so many people, of so many ages, and of so many faiths. Contrary to what some other reviewers have said, I find her argument - her case for "God" - scrupulously argued. Let's be clear about this...Dr. Armstrong is very well read. Time and again, she finds evidences in the thinking of the Bible writers, the early Christian theologians, the Talmudic rabbis of the Middle Ages, the important philosophers of the Islamic Golden Age...or even in practices such as those of the Sufi or Christian mystics. And yes, even the scientists! In a nutshell, the book is an Intellectual History of how the idea of God has been understood and argued, from prehistory to the present, including the recent populism of the New Atheists (as opposed to the 19th century agnostics). One of the most interesting chapters talks about the early history of Christianity when the idea surfaced that God created the universe from "nothing" as opposed to the idea God shaped and formed what already existed as chaos. Once that new idea surfaced, there were two camps, those who believed that Jesus was divine but had been elevated to that status by an immensely powerful being and those who believed that God could never be characterized as being at all and therefore Jesus could be God from the beginning. Do not be distracted by "petty disputes" about her presentation. As an example, whether the "antiChrist" is described once or twice in the Bible is irrelevant. To Dr. Armstrong, we must not confuse the reality of God with the language about the existence of God.

No one can accurately describe the marvelous ecosystem, power, interconnectedness, and beauty of the ocean in mere words...

Can I really be the only person who finds Karen Armstrong, the author of fifteen books on religion, writing in her latest that one cannot comment on the divine with words but only with silence, more than a little ironic? To be fair, Armstrong does offer several interesting insights. Her effort to find universal "truths" that run across faiths is worthwhile and thought provoking. One might even imagine that there are many members of exclusivist faiths for whom this would be a revelation, though one can hardly imagine many of them reading Armstrong's work. At the same time, Armstrong offers an intelligent and evocative response to the new wave of atheistic polemicists - Dawkins, Hitchens, et al - and offers a muscular retort to their rather juvenile view of the divine, as almost all of them seem to have decided that they learned all there was to know about religion as teens in Anglican Sunday School. Armstrong deserves great praise for reminding people that theology is an intellectual pursuit, the attempt to seek to understand God, as opposed to what much of religion seems to be today, namely the effort by many to project their own narrow petty views onto the divine. That said, this work suffers from the same shortcoming of all Armstrong's voluminous work. Were she a theologian, one might forgive her for ignoring all those arguments that ran against her claims of universality, though it would still be intellectually sloppy. However, Armstrong claims to be a historian of religion, and as such she is guilty of appalling sins of omission. When a fact contradicts her thesis, she does not even give it the due regard of inconvenience and seek to reconcile, but simply pretends it is not there.

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