Tracking God: Karen Armstrong's religious vision

by Amy Frykholm in the June 29, 2010 issue

In the late 1980s, when Karen Armstrong was working on a book that eventually became the best-selling *A History of God*, she had done little to suggest that she would become the author of 19 books and an internationally known commentator on world religions. At the time she was, in her own words, “a failed nun” and “a failed academic.”

Born in 1944 in Wildmoor, Worcestershire, England, Armstrong entered a convent at age 17. Her years as a novitiate and nun were not happy ones. Her order, the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, was, in the 1960s, awkwardly adjusting to the new climate created by the reforms of Vatican II. She suffered from epilepsy and anorexia, diseases which went undiagnosed and untreated—her superiors simply thought she was a difficult, maladjusted person. Nor did she receive the education that her hungry mind craved.

In 1967 she was sent to study English literature at Oxford. Two years later, she decided to leave the order. But finding her place in secular life was not much easier. When she emerged from the protective shell of the convent, the counterculture of the 1960s was in full bloom. The rules of her childhood no longer applied. People her age dressed, thought and acted differently. Politics, religion and the social order seemed transformed. In her autobiography *The Spiral Staircase*, Armstrong describes being baffled by society. Her training as a nun had put her “fundamentally at variance with the rest of the world.”

She recalls a party where everywhere was singing along to music she had never heard. “Who are the singers?” she asked. The Beatles, she was told. “The Beatles were a current that united everybody at the party, a thread that bound the room together. They were the spokesmen of their generation, but even though they must have been about my own age, they could not speak for me.”

She looked to make her way as a scholar, but she found herself unaccepted in the academic world. She was told not to apply for fellowships and that she had no future in academia. Her advisers suggested that, at best, she might teach in a secondary school. A final blow: her doctoral thesis on Tennyson was rejected. This rejection confirmed her sense that she was an outsider. “They were really determined to get rid of you,” one of her friends commented years later. “They wanted me and they didn’t want you.”

Unlike many young people in the 1960s, Armstrong was not a dropout. She did not reject society’s structures; society’s structures seemed to reject her.

Although she continued to attend mass for some time after leaving the convent, she felt increasingly estranged from God and increasingly bitter about her experience in the church.

In 1982 she published *Through the Narrow Gate*, an account of her experience as a nun. The book made a brief sensation in England, exposing the dark underbelly of a religious system of which many were predisposed to be suspicious. Although Armstrong tried to be balanced in her account, the book was embraced by antireligious forces as evidence of the damage religion can do.

She was invited to do many television and radio interviews and eventually filmed a segment for television called “The Body of Christ,” in which she discussed her experience with anorexia in the convent. Impressed by her performance, the U.K.’s Channel Four invited her to write a television documentary on the life of St. Paul called *The First Christian*.

This documentary required Armstrong to visit Jerusalem. There she experienced a dramatic shift in her attitude toward religion. As she wandered the city, watching people at prayer, at study and involved in the intricacies of daily life, she became aware of how little she understood Judaism and Islam. She came to see them both as living faiths, intertwined with Christianity and embodied by warm and hospitable people of fierce faith and strong opinions. Armstrong’s bitterness about religion gave way to a profound fascination with the three Abrahamic faiths and a drive to understand her parochial childhood Catholicism in light of that complexity.

After the television program aired in Britain, Arm strong continued to work in television and published two books, a poetry anthology and a polemic on Christian misogyny called *The Gospel According to Woman*. Her next television series, a

historical examination of the Crusades, fell apart during production, and Armstrong took the failure personally—and deeply. She then embarked on writing the “history of God” from Abraham to the present day.

The idea for the book—an account of what Christianity, Islam and Judaism share—was rejected repeatedly by publishing houses. Her agent and friends urged her to try something more mainstream or even literary—a biography or a travel narrative. She ignored the advice.

Several agents later, while Armstrong continued to write other books, her 400-page volume finally found a publisher. Within months, *A History of God* hit the *New York Times* bestseller list and remained there for a year. Suddenly Armstrong was the go-to commentator on religion. Bill Moyers has called her “one of the foremost, and most original, thinkers on religion in our modern world.”

Why was *A History of God* so widely read—or at least so widely purchased? The answer is not immediately clear. Her prose is often maddeningly dense and her points elusive. Her drive to comprehend religion leads her to be constantly comparing elements of different religious traditions, but the connections she draws are not always illuminating. For example, writing about how Christians have regarded Jesus as divine, she says, “We can see the religious impulse behind this startling divinization of Jesus by looking briefly at some developments in India at about the same time.” The phrase “at about the same time” leads the reader into a three-page discussion of the Hindu and Buddhist concept of *bhakti*, or “exalted beings.” Starting out to illuminate what Christians mean when they say that Jesus is God, Armstrong instead asserts that Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism are the products of a “similar impulse”—without ever explaining that impulse.

The payoff of Armstrong’s comparisons and connections is usually disappointing. She addresses contemporary understandings of God by recounting the origins of Mesopotamian myth. She interprets the prophet Isaiah through the Upani shads. Trying to explain why Judaism took idolatry to be such a significant sin, she writes, “It is a reaction that is, perhaps, similar to the revulsion that some of the Fathers of the Church would feel for sexuality. As such, it is not a rational, considered reaction but expressive of deep anxiety and repression.” The reader gets no closer to understanding either idolatry or Christianity’s approach to sexuality.

Her pattern of saying both too much and not enough is evident in her other books as well. In one passage in her most recent book, *A Case for God*, Armstrong covers Christopher Columbus, Portuguese Jews, the origins of modern atheism and the Kabbalah in three breathless—and unrevealing—pages.

Some of her critics claim that she plays fast and loose with history and that by trying to explain everything she explains nothing.

Yet one can also discern why Armstrong's work is appealing. She consistently affirms the religious impulse while re maining scrupulously detached from any particular religious tradition. She is winsomely inclusive—finding value in every kind of religious expression. Her global reach allows readers to participate in this wide embrace and feel more at home in a diverse world.

To Armstrong, all religion fills essentially the same function: it offers meaning and it reaches for transcendence. "Religion was not something tacked on to the human condition," Arm strong declares in *A Case for God*. "The desire to cultivate a sense of the transcendent may be the defining human characteristic." When arguing against the "new atheists," like Richard Dawkins, she contends that humans can no more give up religion than they could give up language.

Yet her work also contains a distinct critique of religion. She thinks humans are too quick to insist that their particular form of meaning is the only correct form. Religious people tend to insist on certainty, homogeneity and doctrinal consistency. In their view, those who do not assent to this formulation deserve exile, if not death. Christianity, Armstrong finds, has been particularly inclined to this path because it has emphasized belief over practice and doctrinal agreement over dialogue. Armstrong calls this the "fundamentalist" path and resoundly rejects it.

The other path that religion can take is toward openness, humility and compassion. Armstrong finds an ethical impulse at work in the world that might be—she hesitates to be definitive on this point—traceable to the higher being that we call "God."

Armstrong's reluctance to call God out is rooted in her appreciation of apophatic theology—the tradition that seeks God by way of what can't be said about God as opposed to what can be said. In other words, she thinks God is best found in silence and uncertainty. The true purpose of all religion, Armstrong argues, is to transcend the ego through silence, as well as through empathy with others.

The emphasis on silence in the Christian tradition, Armstrong contends, was a response to the noisy certainties of doctrine. In the fourth century, official Christianity moved away from its emphasis on right practices and began to emphasize the “doctrinal correctness that would become [Christians’] Achilles’ heel.” In reaction to the focus on doctrine, some Christians adopted a “spirituality of silence and unknowing that would be just as important, characteristic, and influential” in the history of Christianity as the Nicene Creed.

Armstrong’s embrace of apophatic theology goes back to her own experience in the convent. She remembers spending hours and hours in prayer, striving to apprehend God in the Ignatian way: visualizing or imagining some connection with Christ’s life. Time and again, she came up empty. She writes in *The Spiral Staircase* that “the personalized God might work for other people, but he had done nothing for me.”

The idea that God might be known in absence and silence came as a relief to her. Armstrong thinks the God of negative theology and the God of ethics are paradoxically intertwined. If we had an ethical foundation for our lives, she writes, “we would not only have no time to worry overmuch about whether there was a personal God ‘out there’; we would achieve constant ecstasy, because we would be ceaselessly going beyond ourselves, our selfishness and greed.” Armstrong believes that “ecstasy”—the ability of the self to move beyond itself—is central to religion.

In *The Spiral Staircase* she connects religious ecstasy to her experience with epilepsy. Her first grand mal seizure—which occurred on the London subway—serves as a moment of insight regarding her own intellectual project and the core of religious experience: “All the conflicting pieces of the pattern seemed to fuse into a meaningful whole. I entered a new dimension of pure joy, fulfillment and peace: the world seemed transfigured, and its ultimate significance—so obvious and yet quite inexpressible—was revealed. This was God.”

The driving force behind Armstrong’s work is her desire to take disparate pieces and bring them into a meaningful whole. She tries to find a way to speak about God that is respectful of inexpressibility and that is not exclusionary. She strives to expand, reconcile and include all religious experience.

Armstrong argues that religion is not about intellectual assent. It is valuable because it is “life enhancing.” “You will not discover [religions’] truth,” she writes, “unless you apply these myths and doctrines to your own life and put them into practice.”

Practice, Armstrong argues, is the foundation of religion, and compassion is the most fundamental practice. But for herself, religious practice is primarily study. Her spiritual community is the community of ancients found in books. She describes her study of Islam as one of her first religious practices because it took her beyond her own ego toward a spirituality of empathy. “I had to make a constant, imaginative attempt to enter empathetically into the experience of another,” she writes. “This was a kind of ecstasy” because it offered entrance into another kind of religious life.

Armstrong has tried to put her ideas into more concrete practice. In 2008, she won the TED prize (“Technology, Entertainment and Design”) given by an organization founded by Silicon Valley entrepreneur Richard Saul Wurman. TED grants one prize annually to a recipient who is provided the means to execute “one wish to change the world.”

Armstrong used this opportunity to launch the Charter for Compassion. This charter is, in essence, a Web site. People go to the site and sign a statement declaring that compassion “lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves.” The statement declares illegitimate all “interpretation of scripture” that leads to violence, hatred or disdain. The statement has been signed by Desmond Tutu, Melissa Etheridge, the Dalai Lama, the founder of eBay and close to 40,000 other people.

The site also contains “inspirational stories” of how people are putting compassion to work in their communities. The stories offered are surprisingly mundane and only routinely inspiring. One story is about helping a little boy with a grocery cart; another is about giving up a window seat on an airplane. One can hardly complain about someone promoting compassion, and compassion may very well be, in TED’s terms, “the best idea humanity has ever had.” But expressed this way, compassion seems almost banal. If the common denominator of all the world’s religions amounts to this, why put so much energy into studying them?

Armstrong’s approach to compassion is perhaps linked to the absence of community in her religious system. Historically, of course, religious practices do not exist apart from communities, but in the contemporary Western mind-set they do. I can “practice” my own personal religion all day every day, and no one has to even know about it. Since Armstrong primarily practices religion in the privacy of her study, she too is free of the messiness of other humans. While her solitude, as she claims, may open up a compassionate orientation to the world, it is hard to put that into practice

outside of some kind of religious community. It remains an idea in one’s head or an idea out there on the numinous, intangible Internet.

Readers turn to Armstrong for a mixture of historical and theoretical learning, for a sense of how to put the fragments of contemporary religious life together. She offers the religious person a way to feel affirmed in one’s personal religious pursuit even when the world seems structured against it. She offers an approach to religion that isn’t exclusionary and intolerant and that is rooted in a historical perspective that claims both the intellect and the aesthetic. Yet in her hands religion remains an idea without form—abstract, hollow and fleshless—echoing through the halls of history.