

A HISTORY OF GOD – KAREN ARMSTRONG

Deur **Babs Basson** op 01 Mei 2013

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Introduction

Karen Armstrong grew up in the Roman Catholic tradition with a strong belief in the existence of God, the presence of Christ, the efficacy of the sacraments and the prospect of eternal damnation. Especially the fear-part became “a greater reality” to her than God, because it left her with little confidence in the ultimate reality of life on earth. But she also “realised there was more to religion than fear”. She read the lives of saints, mystics and metaphysical poets, like TS Elliot, that moved her with the beauty of their work, but to her God remained distant, “a shadowy figure defined in intellectual abstractions”.

Her interest in religion continued, but the more she learned about its history, the more she found her earlier misgivings to be justified. Like with many people from religious backgrounds, her ideas about God that were formed in childhood “did not keep abreast of her growing knowledge in other disciplines”. Some of her basic findings were: Perceptions about God through the centuries were

highly pragmatic (they had to 'work' for the believers of their times – for this reason, perceptions were adapted over time and from place to place according to changing environments and needs; doctrines were man-made, constructed over long periods; science seemed to have disposed of the 'Creator God'; Biblical scholars had proved that Jesus himself had never claimed to be divine; growing scientific knowledge replaced many 'biblical' mysteries that people once had regarded as supernatural events.

The author had to ask herself, "(h)ad the visions and raptures of saints also been a mere mental quirk", or a neurological defect, like the ones she herself experienced as an epileptic? Similar questions now frequent the minds of honest researchers into the quest for God.

Armstrong reckoned (and had since grown to understand this phenomenon a little differently) there may be a case for arguing that Homo sapiens is also Homo religiosus. Like art, the creation of religions was a way humans could express their need for finding meaning and value in life – "despite the suffering that flesh is heir to". But, what she had also found to be natural to humanity was the tendency to abuse religion for power. Indeed, like religion, our current secularism (Western liberal humanism) is also showing this tendency. It also has to be cultivated by its own disciplines of heart and mind to become the ideal of "finding faith in the ultimate meaning of human life".

Karen Armstrong looks at the history of God from the perspective of the three monotheistic faiths (Jewish, Muslim and Christian). She explains, the focus is not on the history of "the ineffable reality of God itself, which is (of course) beyond time and change, but a history of the way men and women have perceived God" through the ages to present day narratives and beliefs.

(Note: Text ref. to book pages – paperback ed)

Chapter 1: In the beginning...

In ancient Middle East, ideas of God emerged from as far back as 14 000 years ago. Surrounded by the unseen and inexplicable that people regarded as holy/mystical/spiritual, they were religiously inspired to seek answers to the origin and meaning of their existence. Through the ages and growing knowledge people came to new perspectives of forces that controlled their lives.

Monotheism was apparently one of the earliest ideas for explaining the mystery (and tragedy) of life. Anthropologists' first findings of times and cultures before the age of written history suggested that people worshipped One God (or Ultimate Reality), a distant, other-worldly and strangely absent God with regard to their daily challenges. In their efforts to reach a closer association with this High God people gradually turned to intercessors, the more accessible gods of the pagan pantheons[1]. Interestingly, "(w)hen people began to devise their myths and worship their gods they were not seeking to find a literal explanation for natural phenomena. Their symbolic stories (...) were an attempt to express their wonder and to link this pervasive mystery with their own lives" [2]. (Is there another way of contemplating the Inexpressible? [3])

Karen Armstrong vividly introduces us to the cultures of early civilizations: from as early as 4000 BCE in Mesopotamia (the Tigris-Euphrates valley, which is now Iraq) and Babylon to Canaan, the Promised Land of the Israelites. She reveals how people have always attributed their cultural

achievements to their gods. A fascinating history of interrelatedness and comparison unfolds as she points out the impact of surrounding cultures and religions on people's symbolic actions, sacraments and literature. Shared notions like being in touch with a sacred power or 'the source of all being', and a 'holy city', would become important themes in all three of the monotheistic religions[4].

Only by the eighth century BCE and onwards (the so-called Axial Age), the Israelites started developing a distinct vision of their own. Israel's prophets developed a unique interest in historical time, in Yahweh as the only Creator of heaven and earth, and in a certain division between man/earth (adām/adāmah) and the Divine. The gods of Israel's pagan heritage, who had been both territorial and pragmatic, were being replaced by a God who (obviously in line with human understanding) talked and instructed – and his words became extremely important to all three of the monotheistic religions. The God of Midian was now in Jordan. The God of Abraham was indeed Yahweh. Moses convinced the Israelites that El Shaddai, the God of their fathers, the god of volcanoes and wars, was one and the same, the Only God.

Chapter 2: One God

The late eighth century BCE was an anxious time for the people of Israel, and after the ten northern tribes had disappeared from history the little kingdom of Judah in the south struggled to survive. With clear biblical references, the author emphasises Israel's predicament and how the prophets, through their "elaborate mimes", in a sense created a God in their own image. Isaiah, a member of the royal family, saw Yahweh as a king. Amos ascribed his own empathy with the suffering of the poor to Yahweh; Hosea (married to a prostitute) saw Yahweh as a jilted husband who continued to feel a yearning tenderness for his wife. "It seems all religions must begin with some anthropomorphism."

The growing traditions forged by Israel's prophets impacted the gulf forming between humans and the divine. The tribal God of Israel (his 'chosen people') was now the One God who demanded a justice for all nations. Although God had always been on the side of the weak and oppressed, it was now the Israelites that were castigated as the oppressors. The God who was becoming the lord and master of history, the prophets insisted, revealed himself in both political catastrophe and victory. The triumphant God of Moses was replaced by the God of Isaiah who was full of sorrow. He lamented his people; their festivals and blood sacrifices revolted him. Isaiah, as the other prophets of this new age (a.o. Amos and Hosea), discovered the overriding duty of compassion and came to understand the inner meaning of religion.

This very positive characteristic of sharing the egalitarian and socialist ethic of Amos and Isaiah would become the hallmark of the major religions formed in the Axial Age (Axial Age: the time of the One-God idea taking root among major religions). But, as always in history, the religion of compassion was followed only by a minority, with the majority preferring a less demanding, more exclusive religion of cultic observance in the Temple. And, even more unfortunately, Israel's self-regard as the 'chosen people' and unfair treatment of the Canaanite religion grew in an intolerance and hostility that characterised monotheism until today! [5]

The author expands on the growing One God-idea, the battle of Yahweh with the gods and goddesses of Canaan and the establishment of the masculinity of Yahweh – with the subsequent decline in the status of women as one of the less positive characteristics of the Axial Age – and describes the destructive dimensions of this hostility in the late seventh century BCE, during the reign of the young King Josiah in Judah. The king, who anxiously wanted to reverse the syncretistic policies of especially his two predecessors, King Manasseh (687–642) and King Amon (642-640), instructed extensive repairs to the Temple to clear it of all the idols and fertility symbols. With great zeal Josiah began his reform. He, pulled down the effigy of Asherah (regarded by some as the wife of Yahweh) and destroyed the apartments of the temple prostitutes. According to the Chronicles (written 300 years later) all the worshippers of these symbols as well as their priests were killed and their towns destroyed. Josiah led this ‘holy’ war with unholy precision and made Yahweh the author thereof.

Noteworthy: In the excavations the High Priest Hilkiah discovered an ancient manuscript purported to be Moses’ last sermon. It is now almost certain that the ‘Book of Law’ discovered by Hilkiah was the core text of the book we know as Deuteronomy. This text includes the declaration, “Listen, Israel! Yahweh is our Elohim (plural), Yahweh alone!” – a distinctive 7th century (BCE) interpretation, which would later become the Jewish declaration of faith (“Yahweh our God is One and unique”). Researchers found that the editors of the Pentateuch had revised the historical books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings in accordance with the new ideology, and later added passages that gave a Deuteronomist interpretation of the Exodus myth to older narratives[6]. “The dangers of such theologies of election, which are not qualified by the transcendent perspective of an Isaiah, are clearly shown in the holy wars that have scarred the history of monotheism. Instead of making God a symbol to challenge our prejudice and force us to contemplate our shortcomings, it can be used to endorse our egotistic hatred and make it absolute.” (It makes God behave exactly like us!)

During the 4th century BCE, the Jews came under the influence of Greek rationalism. By the 2nd century, Wisdom literature was well established in the Middle East, but still highly pragmatic. (The author of Proverbs, 3rd century, personified Wisdom (or the ‘glory’ of God according to the Priestly authors) and suggested ‘she’ was the masterplan that God had devised when he had created the world (human beings).[7] Tension developed between Jews and Greeks in the Hellenistic cities of the Middle East when people started to merge Yahweh with some of the Greek gods. The Jews claimed that Wisdom was not Greek cleverness but the fear of Yahweh. This tension is notable in The Wisdom of Solomon (written in about 50 BCE). In contrast to the growing tension between the Jews and the Greeks, the Romans were drawn to the high moral character of the Jews. The Jews were given religious liberty and were respected. However, a group of Palestinian zealots, strongly opposed to Roman rule, orchestrated in 66 CE a rebellion against the Romans which they kept going for 4 years, when the Romans had to crush it mercilessly in fear of it spreading to the Jews of the Diaspora. In 70 CE the new Emperor Vespasian conquered Jerusalem, burnt down the Temple and renamed the city Aelia Capitolana.

Again, the Jews were forced into exile. Of those who stayed behind, some formed sects (like the Essenes and the Qumran) and withdrew to live in separate monastic-style communities. But the Pharisees, who were the most progressive and respected of all the Jews of Palestine, showed in this devastating time that they did not need a Temple to worship. Their atonement was not sacrifice, but “the acts of loving kindness”. Their Rabbis had a strong sense of presence. Any official (objective)

doctrines would have been quite out of place. They had a very important insight: “God could not be described in a formula as though he were the same for everybody: he was an essentially subjective experience (...) To this day, theological ideas about God are private matters in Judaism and are not enforced by the establishment.” The religion of the Rabbis was accepted because it worked!

Chapter 3: A light to the Gentiles

We know very little about Jesus. The first ‘full-length’ account of his life, the Gospel Mark, was written some 40 years after his death. By that time historical facts had been overlaid with mythical elements expressing the acquired meaning of Jesus for his followers, i.e. as the Messiah, the inaugurator of the Messianic Kingdom of God, seeing him in visions and declaring him as risen from the dead – but still as a normal man. In Mark’s Gospel no angels sang at his birth; a carpenter’s son, he followed John the Baptist, a wandering ascetic, probably an Essene. John baptised him and immediately recognised him as the Messiah. Jesus began to preach, declaring “the Kingdom of God has arrived!” Like the Pharisees, he believed in charity and loving-kindness and was devoted to the Torah. He also taught a version of Rabbi Hillel’s Golden Rule (“Do unto others...”). While Luke also gives the Pharisees “fairly good press” in both his Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles (and Paul even flaunts his pharisaic background), the anti-Semitic tenor of Matthew’s Gospel reflects the growing tension between the Jews and Christians during the 80s by portraying Jesus as being “unedifyingly” critical of the Pharisees and Scribes.

While the Gospels described Jesus as a human being with divine powers (*dunamis*), a kind of faith healer, a follower of Rabbi Hillel (a Pharisee at that stage, who later converted to Christianity) and pupil of Gamaliel, the idea of his divinity gradually developed after his death when his followers had decided that he had been God in human form – until the doctrine of the Incarnation was finalised in the 4th century.

Paul never called Jesus God. He called him “the Son of God” (as David and others – kings and caesars – had been called). The doctrine of the Incarnation of God in Jesus has always scandalised Jews as well as the other one-god religions, and Paul’s explanation of Jesus’ dying for our sins somewhat changed the scandal of the crucifixion into a meaningful benefit for all believers. “It had released a ‘new kind of life’ and a ‘new creation’ – a constant theme in Paul’s letters. To Paul, who never knew Jesus personally, “Jesus had become the source of (his own) religious experience (...) a subjective and mystical experience that made him describe Jesus as a sort of atmosphere in which ‘we live and move and have our being’ [8] (...) talking about him in ways that some of his contemporaries might have talked about a god” (p107). “Jesus himself certainly never claimed to be God.” Yet, looking at developments in other religions of the world regarding the theme of the Incarnation, the author unveils a “religious impulse (or) perennial human yearning for humanised religion” (see pp 103–107).

KA continues to describe the development of the New Israel, inspired by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and carried through adversity into the pagan world, growing from its first claims as being a form of Judaism into a Gentile faith with an own, distinctive conception of God, interpreted and influenced by many voices (such as philosophers and martyrs, Gnostics and mystics,

theologians like Tertullian and Jerome)... until, ultimately, Constantine proclaims it as the state religion of the Roman Empire!

But, “no sooner had Constantine brought peace to the Church, than a new danger arose from within which split Christians into bitterly warring camps”...

Chapter 4: Trinity: The Christian God

In about 320 CE in Egypt, Syria and Asia Minor, a passionate debate was raised and abstruse questions asked about who were greater, God the Father or the Son. Could Jesus have been God in the same way than God the Father? Controversy was rife amongst bishops and laity. Arius (‘Jesus was divine, but he was not the Father’) challenged the Bishop of Alexandria, who had to admit that Jesus had said the Father was greater than he. Arius propagated his ideas in the laity debate. Origen, held in high esteem by both sides had taught a similar doctrine. Arius, Alexander and Athanasius had started moving away from Plato/Greek thought and believed that, according to Scripture, God had created the world out of nothing. [9] We see how this new doctrine of creation ex nihilo emphasised that only “God who had drawn (men and women) out of nothingness in the first place and kept them perpetually in being could assure their eternal salvation” (p131).

Ironically, although Christian belief in the divinity of the man Jesus had somehow crossed the gulf that separated God from humanity[10], the arguments about ‘how’ God did it and the creation ex nihilo idea evoked new strife between his followers. Because “Logos had been made flesh”, “(e)ither Christ, the Word, belonged to the divine realm (which was now the domain of God alone) or he belonged to the fragile created order. Arius and Athanasius put him on opposite sides of the gulf...” – see pp132–137 on these arguments and Athanasius’ creed.

Note: Right/wrong? There was NO officially orthodox opinion until in 325 CE “the emperor Constantine himself intervened and summoned a synod to Nicaea in modern Turkey to settle the issue”. The bishops at the gathering mostly held a view midway between Athanasius and Arius, although, with the emperor “breathing down their necks”, only Arius and two others were brave enough to refuse to sign his Creed. Thereby, the idea of creation ex nihilo became doctrine, insisting that the Creator and Redeemer were one.

Questions mounted: Were they not promoting tritheism? Could the Logos (an inherent quality of wisdom/potential of God) also be “an eternal divine being”, of the ‘same stuff’ as the Father? If there were only one God, how could the Logos also be divine? (See the solution of the Cappadocians, p137 and further.) Muslims and Jews found the doctrine blasphemous.

The Cappadocians, three Greek trained bishops, distinguished between philosophy/learning and experience, thus between exoteric and esoteric truth, or between Kerygma (the public teaching of the Church) and Dogma (the deeper meaning of biblical truth). Dogma, they explained, could only be expressed in symbolic form. “Behind the liturgical symbols and the lucid teaching of Jesus there was a secret dogma which represented a more developed understanding of the faith” (138) – secret in the sense that it could only be grasped through deep contemplation. The Cappadocians formulated the “three hypostases (expressions) of God” as the Father, the Son and the Spirit (whose presence within us was said to be our salvation). “Ultimately, the Trinity only made sense as a mystical or

spiritual experience: it had to be lived, not thought, because God went far beyond human concepts.” Imagine the embarrassment of these explanations to the rational approach of the eighteenth century, the Age of Reason. Therefore, the doctrine of the Incarnation, as expressed at Nicaea, “could lead to simplistic idolatry when people start thinking about God in too human a way”.

Then follows a very interesting description of Augustine, his theology and works (p143–149) and how with harsh doctrine he “paints a terrible picture of an implacable God”. Augustine’s heritage of the West (its poor regard for our humanity as being chronically flawed and alienated from God (pp149/150) was ironic, “since the idea that God had become flesh and shared our humanity should have encouraged Christians to value the body”[11].

Greeks and Latins, East and West developed significantly different views of the divinity of Christ. The Greek concept of the incarnation was defined by Maximus the Confessor (c. 580–662), the ‘father’ of the Byzantine theology: “Men and women had a potential for the divine and would only become fully human if this were realised” (p156). “The classic (West) theology was expressed by Anselm, Bishop of Canterbury (1033–1109) in his treatise *Why God became Man*.” Sin, atonement by the sacrificial Son ...etc – a tidy, legalistic scheme that depicted God along human lines[12].

Christians in the West adopted an exclusive notion of religious truth. “Jesus was the first and the last Word of God to the human race and rendered future revelation unnecessary” (consequently their aversion for the prophet Mohammed)! This, on the other hand, gave great impetus to the rise of a more Semitic notion of God throughout the Middle East and North Africa, and many of the Greek converts in these lands (where Hellenism was not on home-ground) gladly turned away from Greek Trinitarianism.

Chapter 5: Unity: The God of Islam

Round about 610, Muhammad ibn Abdullah, an illiterate Arab merchant of Mecca who had never read the Bible (and maybe never heard of the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel), had a very similar experience to theirs. On his annual spiritual retreats with his family to ‘his’ Mount Hira he would pray to al-Lah[13], the High God of the ancient Arabian pantheon – and distribute food and alms to the poor.

He was very concerned about the sudden affluence in Mecca that replaced the old tribal values (the *murawah*[14]) with ruthless capitalism and lacking care. This was complicated by a growing dissatisfaction and spiritual unrest during the *jahiliyyah* (this last phase of the pre-Islamic period, or ‘time of ignorance’).

The author expands on some important facts about Muhammad (like his belief and that of many of the Arab tribes that al-Lah was the same as the God of the Jews and Christians among them), also their fierce pride of the Kabah (the cube shaped shrine in Mecca, originally dedicated to al-Lah) and its sacred tradition of unity, and their tentative regard-mingled-with-resentment for the ‘superior’ religion of the Jews and Christians in their midst.

Muhammad was longing for a divine revelation from the God of Abraham and it was on this Mount Hira, in 610 on the 17th day of Ramadan, where he had an ‘ineffable experience’ of divine presence

and “found the first words of a new scripture pouring from his mouth”. This scripture would ultimately be called the qur’an[15]. The revelations that followed were all very painful, a difficult creative process, as he said in later years: “Never once did I receive a revelation without feeling that my soul was being torn away from me.” Later, after his death in 632, the Koran was supplemented with the hadith or what was considered to be his collected maxims, which became sacred traditions.

Muhammad attracted many converts, especially from the underprivileged and marginalised groups, women[16], slaves and youth who became disillusioned with the capitalistic ethos of Mecca. Over the years his message became more focussed on monotheism and when he finally condemned these ancient cults as idolatrous, he lost many of his followers who were comfortable with the status quo. Islam became a despised and persecuted minority (note ref. to Satanic Verses, which came to our attention through the tragic Salman Rushdie affair, pp176–8).

The Muslim profession of faith, “there is no God but al-Lah and Muhammad is his messenger”, would become the first pillar of the Islam. Muhammad never expected Jews or Christians to convert to Islam, because they have received authentic revelations of their own (see the very interesting reference from Koran 29:46 to prove this point). “It is important to stress the point, because tolerance is not a virtue that many Western people today would feel inclined to attribute to Islam. Yet from the start, Muslims saw revelation in less exclusive terms than either Jews or Christians.” Muslims are intolerant of injustice, especially (as they see it) by the materialistic and powerful Western countries.[17]

Some friendly Jews became honorary members of groups where Muslims discussed the Bible. In this way they helped Muhammad to develop his own knowledge of scripture, the chronology of the prophets, Abraham, Moses and Jesus (and Ishmael’s history, adding some local legends of their own). The Jews eventually came to reject Islam and not the other way round (p184). To Muhammad this rejection was a great disappointment. He now learned they had serious disagreements with one another, like their worship of the Golden Calf and the blasphemous doctrine of the Trinity, “even though the Koran still insists that not all ‘the people of earlier revelation’ have fallen into error and that essentially all religions are one” (p185).

Interesting is the explanation of the meaning of the hajj and the rite of the circumambulation of the Kabah expressing the spirituality of community (pp187–188).

In the years before his sudden death from illness in 632, Muhammad and the Islam were engaged in a bitter struggle for survival and he evolved a theology for the just war with which most Christians would agree (p187). Never in his lifetime did he become the “warlord, who forced Islam on a reluctant world by force of arms” (p187) in the way he was often presented in the West.

In spite of their common Semitic experience, developmental similarities (possibly mutual influences regarding God’s essence and activities, symbolism vs. literalism, incarnation, transcendence, immanence and the later influence of rationalism) the three one-God faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam “would come to different but highly significant conclusions about the validity of philosophy and its relevance to the mystery of God” (p202).

Chapter 6: The God of the Philosophers

As a result of the 9th century infusion of the Arab world with (brilliantly translated) Greek science and philosophy texts[18], a new type of Muslim emerged, dedicated to the ideal of falsafah[19], a discipline inspired by this Greek encounter. Their enthusiastic studies of astronomy, alchemy, medicine and mathematics resulted in a renaissance of discoveries unknown of in any previous period of history.

The Arab Faylasufs ('philosophers') wanted to live rationally "in accordance with the laws that they believed governed the cosmos and which could be discerned at every level of reality", and apart from science they also tried to apply the laws of Greek metaphysics to Islam. They were mostly devout men and believed al-Lah was compatible with their rationalist ideal. But, whereas they believed that the God of the Philosophers was identical with al-Lah, the Greek Christians "had decided that the God of the Greeks must be modified by the more paradoxical God of the Bible" who seemingly had little to do with reason and logic.

The "experience of Falsafah is relevant to our present religious predicament" (p205). "Science demands the fundamental belief that there is a rational explanation for everything; it also requires an imagination and courage which is not dissimilar to religious creativity. Like the prophet or the mystic, the scientist also forces himself to confront the dark and unpredictable realm of uncreated reality" – a perception which inevitably demanded a revision of older beliefs[20] – "in our own day it has made classic theism impossible for many people".

Thus Yaqub ibn Ishaq al-Kindi (d. c.870) was the first Muslim to apply the rational method to the Koran. Many others followed, combining science with mysticism, realism with symbolism, to explain their varying theological ideas[21]. While being inspired by Hellenism and influenced by Persian, Indian and Gnostic thinking, the Faylasufs saw no contradiction between science and faith/revelation. "The philosophers and the Koran were in agreement that God was simplicity itself: he was One" (p218) and could therefore not be analysed into components or attributes that had been thought out by human beings.

This account of God's nature was much too abstract to Ibn Sina. Interested in religious psychology and wanting to relate his idea of God's nature to the religious experience of believers, Sufis[22] and batinis, he used the Plotinian scheme of emanation[23] to explain the experience of prophecy. Later, the great Iranian philosopher Yahya Suhrawardi would found the Iraqi school, which fuses philosophy with spirituality in the way envisaged by Ibn Sina.

The disciplines of Kalam[24] and Falsafah had inspired a similar intellectual movement among the Jews of the Islamic empire. They began to write their own 'philosophy' in Arabic, introducing a metaphysical and speculative element into Judaism for the first time.[25] Also concerned about the anthropomorphic portrait of God in the scriptures and the Talmud, the problem of ex nihilo[26] and the relation between revelation and reason, they were deeply dependent upon the Muslim thinkers but naturally came to different conclusions[27]: the world was not eternal; the created order was intelligently planned; it had life and energy: therefore God, who created it, must also have Wisdom, Life and Power, although not as separate hypostases (as the Christian doctrine of the Trinity suggested), but merely as attributes; suffering = punishment for sin, it purifies and make us humble (but this was far too 'human' to satisfy Faylasuf thinking), and the prophets were superior to any

philosopher. “Ultimately reason could only attempt to demonstrate systematically what the Bible had taught” (p221).

Other religious/philosophical thinkers became increasingly disillusioned. Al-Ghazzali was aware (as any modern sceptic) that “certainty was a psychological condition that was not necessarily objectively true” (p222). Al-Ghazzali, having studied each of the disciplines of Kalam, Falsafah and Sufi mysticism, had found the disciples of all four (main versions of Islam) claimed total conviction, but how could this claim be verified objectively? “Faylasufs said that they acquired certain knowledge by rational argument; Mystics insisted that they had found it through the Sufi disciplines; Ismailis felt that it was only found in the teachings of their (hidden and inaccessible) Imam. But the reality that we call God cannot be tested empirically, so how could we be sure that our beliefs were not mere delusions?” (p223) There was no way that any of these propositions could be verified... Al-Ghazzali eventually fell into deep depression which, together with his fear of hellfire, made him resign his prestigious academic post and drove him to join the (intuitive) Sufis.

Interestingly, there he found what he was looking for. “Without abandoning his reason – he always distrusted the more extravagant forms of Sufism – al-Ghazzali discovered that the more mystical disciplines yielded a direct but intuitive sense of something that could be called ‘God’” (p224). See also al-Ghazzali’s mystical treatise: *Mishkat al-Anwar*, his views on the two realms of the physical/spiritual world and the special gift of the prophetic spirit (pp225–6).

“Falsafah was not entirely dead as a result of al-Ghazzali’s polemic, however. In Cordova (the capital of Muslim Spain), a distinguished Muslim philosopher attempted to revive it and to argue that it was the highest form of religion” (p229), but we can see the beginning of a parting between the East and the West in their conception of God. “(...) Abu al-Walid ibn Ahmad ibn Rushd (1126–1198), known in Europe as Averroes, became an authority in the West among both Jews and Christians” where the champion of rationalism against blind faith, Ernest Renan, hailed him as a free spirit. He also had an immense influence on such distinguished theologians as Maimonides, Thomas Aquinas and Albert the Great. Although Ibn Rushd was a marginalised figure in the Islamic world he passionately disapproved of the way al-Ghazzali had approached his differences with the Falsafah. Being a jurist of Shariah Law (the ulema had always been suspicious of the Falsafah and its fundamentally different God) he managed to unite Aristotle with a more traditional Islamic piety.[28] But although he introduced Aristotle to the West who may have regarded him as signature theologian for Islam, in the Islamic world where mysticism was so important he remained a revered but secondary figure. Instead, “Yahya Suhrawardi and Muid ad-Din ibn al-Arabi followed in the footsteps of Ibn Sina rather than Ibn Rusd and attempted to fuse philosophy with mystical spirituality” (p231).

In the Jewish world, Ibn Rushd’s great disciple was the great Talmudist and philosopher Rabbi Moses ibn Maimon (1135–1203), known as Maimonides. Also a native of Cordova, however, Maimonides had to flee Spain when the capital had fallen prey to the Berber sect of medieval Islamic fundamentalists, the Almoravids which persecuted the Jewish community. He settled in Egypt where he held high office in the government and even became the physician of the sultan. Like Ibn Rushd, Maimonides believed that the religious knowledge of Falsafah was the “royal road to God” and therefore only for the elite, that certain doctrines were necessary for salvation, and he also published a creed, of 13 articles, markedly similar to Ibn Rushd’s.[29]

Although this creed never became entirely accepted in Judaism, it suggested a rationalistic and intellectualist approach to religion that leads to dogmatism and the identification of 'faith' with 'correct belief'. Yet Maimonides still maintained that God was incomprehensible and inaccessible to human reason and we can only use the Via Negativa[30] to form positive notions of God. His first regard was for the God of the Bible. He considered prophecy to be superior to philosophy, the imagination to be above the intellect, and pointed out that neither creation ex nihilo nor emanation could be proven definitely by reason alone.

His ideas spread among the Jews of Southern France and Spain. Some Jews had turned more towards mysticism and in the 14th century the esoteric discipline of Kabbalah developed.

"During the 13th and 14th centuries the Christian wars of Reconquest began pushing back Islam in Spain and brought the anti-Semitism of Western Europe to the peninsula. This culminated in the destruction of Spanish Jewry and during the 16th century the Jews turned away from Falsafah and developed an entirely new conception of God that was inspired by mythology rather than scientific logic" (p234).

The first Crusade of 1096–99 was the first sign of cooperation in the new West. It marked the end of the Dark Ages. The new Rome, backed by the Christian nations of Northern Europe, again appeared on the international scene. But the Christianity of the Angles, the Saxon and the Franks was rudimentary. They were aggressive martial people and wanted an aggressive religion. Despite the efforts of the Benedictine monks of the 11th century to tether their martial spirit to the Church and teach them true Christian values by means of such devotional practices as the pilgrimage, they still had primitive conceptions of God and religion: their soldier saints (St George, St Mercury and St Demetrius) differed little in practice from pagan deities and Jesus was seen as their feudal lord, summoning his knights to recover the Holy Land, rather than the incarnate Logos. Soon their journey had turned into a slaughtering of Jewish communities along the Rhine Valley... "When they finally conquered Jerusalem in the summer of 1099, they fell on the Jewish and Muslim inhabitants of the city with the zeal of Joshua and massacred them with a brutality that shocked even their own contemporaries" (p235). "Thenceforth Christians in Europe regarded Jews and Muslims as the enemies of God"; and for a long time also the Greek Orthodox Christians of Byzantium who made them feel inferior (even though, during the 9th century, some of the more educated Christians of the West had been inspired by Greek theology)[31].

"The crusading religion of Western Christendom had separated it from the other monotheistic traditions" (p234). In 1054 Eastern and Western Churches broke off relations in a schism which had to do with both a political conflict and a dispute about the Trinity[32]. The filioque rift revealed that the Greeks and Latins were evolving quite different conceptions of God – the West became more and more concerned with the intellectually proven (see Anselm[33]) and "correct opinion" of God that they regarded as binding to everybody, and the Greek Orthodox confined their study of God and of the Trinity and the Incarnation in essentially mystical doctrines (theoria[34]). The Reformation caused further rifts: "Catholics and Protestants could not agree on the mechanics of how salvation happened and exactly what the Eucharist was. And by the 4th crusade in 1204 the crusaders had "fatally wounded" the Greek empire. This break-up had turned out to be permanent.

"Few thinkers have made such a lasting contribution to Western Christianity as Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) who attempted a synthesis of Augustine and the Greek philosophy which had (then)

recently been made available in the West” (see p243 for the works of excellent translators who assisted in bringing the West up to par on the works of the philosophers). Bonaventure (1221–74) had much the same vision (for comparison, see p246–7) – *The Journey of the Mind to God*. They both had seen the religious experience as primary, but they both also evolved rational proofs of God’s existence to articulate their faith with their scientific studies and to link it with other more ordinary experiences. “In the Jewish, Muslim and Greek Orthodox worlds, the God of the philosophers was being rapidly overtaken by the God of the mystics” (p247).

Chapter 7: The God of the Mystics

The ‘personal God’ idea developed in both the Judeo-Christian and – to a lesser degree – in Islam. The personal God has helped monotheists to value the sacred and inalienable rights of the individual and so has given rise to the Western tradition of humanism. Yet, a personal God can become a mere idol carved in our own image, “a projection of our limited needs, fears and desires... endorsing our prejudices instead of compelling us to transcend them”. And this personal, male, talking, calling, disaster-willing God that “sees, hears and judges like human beings” has created an imbalance in human and sexual mores, embedding in us the concepts of our mundane experience.

The (monotheistic) world religions “all seem to have recognized this danger and have sought to transcend the personal conception of supreme reality”. And, although historical monotheism was not originally mystical, all three faiths have developed a mystical tradition – the God experienced by the mystics has, until recently, become normative among the faithful (with the exception of the Western Christian-mainstream).

Myth, mysticism, mystery – all three words are derived from the Greek verb ‘müsteion’: to close the eyes or the mouth. Darkness and silence are not popular words in the West. But the tide may be changing... Since the 1960s Western people have been showing a desire for some kind of mysticism, “it may be that people in the West are feeling the need for an alternative to a purely scientific view of the world”. They have been discovering the inadequacy of theism[35]; the benefits of certain types of Yoga; an enthusiasm for psychoanalysis, a discipline very similar to mysticism (see Freud and Jung using ancient myths, such as the story of Oedipus, to explain their new science), etc.

Karen Armstrong expands further on mysticism (the primordial experience of presence or One-ness), on the development and difficult acceptance of Jewish mysticism that started in the second and third centuries, and also on some very interesting texts that derived from this period and were later incorporated into those of the 5th Century Throne Mysticism[36] and the ‘new’ Jewish mysticism, the Kabbalah[37] of the 12th and 13th centuries. She also refers to similar mystical ‘Throne experiences’ of Paul, the Prophet Muhammad and Augustine’s – journeys past the limits of literal thought, experiences or visions of God “that can in no way appeal to the normal experiences of thought or language” (p275).

“This was not a literal journey through outer space to a God ‘out there’, but a mental ascent to a reality within.” Although it is culturally conditioned, “this kind of ‘ascent’ seems an incontrovertible fact of life”. Monotheists have called the climatic insight a ‘vision of God’; Plotinus had assumed that it was the experience of the One; Buddhists would call it an intimation of nirvana”. The point is... the mystical experience of God is not an objective perception of a fact outside the self; rather than through the logical faculty, it is a subjective, sometimes deliberate offset of an interior journey,

undertaken through the image-making part of the mind or imagination. And, ultimately, “certain physical or mental exercises yield the final vision”.

The author, again, compares the ancient forms of mysticism amongst religious cultures, and embroiders on the mystery and ineffability as paradox in any doctrinal statement about God.

Since the eleventh century, Muslim philosophers had come to the conclusion that reason – which was indispensable for such studies as medicine or science – was quite inadequate when it came to the study of God. To rely on reason alone was like attempting to eat soup with a fork.

What happened in the West? In spite of having launched its own mystical religion by the 14th century and had made a promising start under distinguished mystics from both England, Germany and the Lowlands, the Protestant Reformers (16th century) decried “this unbiblical spirituality” and in the RCC mystics like St Teresa of Avila were often threatened by the Inquisition of the Counter-Reformation. “Therefore, as a result of the Reformation, Europe began to see God in still more rationalistic terms” (p302).

Chapter 8: A God for Reformers

The 15th and 16th centuries (discovery of the New World and beginning of the scientific revolution) introduced a time of transition, of anxiety and achievement, of bloodshed and opportunity.

The Christian West, while catching up with and overtaking the other cultures of the civilised world (Oikumene), was becoming more concerned about faith than ever before. “The laity were especially dissatisfied with the medieval forms of religion that no longer answered their needs in the brave new world.” Some reformers discovered new ways of considering God and salvation, with others fantasising about ‘atheism’ (p303). Christians in Europe were split into two warring camps – Catholic and Protestant – while in the East the Russians continued with ‘Greek’ traditions and spirituality.

The year 1492 (the year of the discovery of the New World) the Christian regime of Ferdinand and Isabella in Spain introduced a crises-ridden period for Muslims, Greeks and Jews, starting with the expulsion of Muslims from Spain and the Iberian peninsula which had been their home for 800 years. The destruction of Muslim Spain was fatal for the Jews[38]. A few weeks after the conquest of Granada the Christian monarchs gave the Jews in diaspora, until now protected by the Spanish Muslims, a choice of baptism or expulsion. Some 150 000 Jews were forcibly deported and fled to Turkey, the Balkans and North Africa.

Intolerance gradually replaced the respect of the past and understanding between the three religions of Abraham with a new conservatism and religious exclusivity. The philosophers and humanists of the Renaissance were highly critical of the medieval piety of the scholastics and their reverence for Augustine as a theologian; they felt “their abstruse speculations made God sound alien and boring” (p322). They desired a closer and more realistic experience of God and rediscovered Augustine’s Confessions. They saw him as a fellow man on a personal quest and Christianity as an experience rather than a body of doctrines.

The Author follows with interesting insights with regard to the immense cycle of religious change that took place in Europe during “the Reformation” (16th century), of the ensuing theological polarisation and political battles within Christianity and between the other God-religions. The term (Reformation) “suggests a more deliberate and unified movement that actually occurred” (p324). This period in history was earmarked with a religious fervour combined with a heightened sense of individualism and a rise of nationalism, bringing about painful and violent changes and propelling the West towards modernity.

Some interesting topics of debates of that period (pp324–343): the vast distance between man and God (world and God = irreconcilable opposites, p336); efforts to explain the Trinity (see also the ‘Unitarians’ Servetus, Blandrata and Socinus on this topic, p 330); the Greek acceptance of theological paradoxes; torture and dark confessions; phobias/fears and emotions; Luther’s depression, anti-Semitism and belief in witchcraft; his pessimism about human nature, his polemic against scholasticism, and his doctrine of justification; Calvinism and the Puritan revolution’s effect on Western ethos; Calvin on radical conversion, predestination, free will and the sovereignty of God; logical thought, rising Bible literalism[39] and limitation of a personalised God (replacing the biblical God as symbol of a transcendent reality with a contradicting, despotic tyrant, pp333, 334); Loyola’s Jesuits and Spiritual Exercises; Ignatius’s Rule for the Discernment of Spirits and his ‘Contemplation for the Obtaining Love’, which sees ‘all things as creatures of the goodness of God and reflections of it’. “For Ignatius the world was full of God” (p335); bloodshed between Christians and Catholics; bewildering variety of newly interpreted doctrines making faith harder to achieve than ever before; incredulous uses of the term “atheism” to insult those who dared to differ (337/9); and Copernicus and Galilei[40] (p340).

Armstrong concludes this chapter: “... (A)s Europe approached modernity, the theologians themselves were handing the future atheists the ammunition for the rejection of a God who had little religious value and who filled many people with fear rather than with hope and faith. Like the philosophers and scientists, post-Reformation Christians had effectively abandoned the imaginative God of the mystics and sought enlightenment from the God of reason” (p343).

Chapter 9: Enlightenment

This chapter sketches the effect of technicalisation/industrialisation/modernisation (spreading literacy & efficiency in all ranks and spheres, accumulation of wealth, achievement and continual change) on social organisation, public service, revision of laws, autonomy of men and women, and inevitably the role and nature of God. By the end of the 16th century, “(t)he new efficiency ... gradually brought the West up to the standards already achieved in other parts of the world, such as China and the Ottoman empire, and then enabled it to surpass them” (p346).

Karen Armstrong reflects on the effects of progress and each new generation’s expectations to live better than the old: “The study of history was dominated by a new myth: that of Progress. It achieved great things but now that damage to the environment has made us realise that this way of life is as vulnerable as the old, we are, perhaps, beginning to realise that it is as fictitious as most of the other mythologies that have inspired humanity over the centuries” (p347).

The old conservatism of the developed world was replaced by a new optimism, “a desire for change”. But also, through specialisation and capitalism came a new competitiveness, isolation and tunnel vision with intellectuals feeling obliged to work out their own theories of life and religion, starting from scratch. “The new scientific spirit was empirical, based solely on observation and experiment.” Taking nothing for granted, “the pioneers were increasingly ready to risk a mistake or to knock down established authorities and institutions such as the Bible, the Church and the Christian tradition. The old ‘proofs’ for God’s existence were no longer entirely satisfactory and natural scientists and philosophers, full of enthusiasm for the empirical method, felt compelled to verify the objective reality of God in the same way as they proved other demonstrable phenomena” (p349).

The Author provides some very interesting material of the scientists and philosophers of the Enlightenment and their narratives of knowing/believing. Although most of them believed implicitly in the existence of God (and atheism “was still felt to be abhorrent”), a few people began to see that not even God could be taken for granted. The remarkable French physicist, mathematician and theologian Blaise Pascal (1623–1662), “who took atheism seriously”, was maybe one of the first. His example of doubt and fear is a reminder that we should not generalise about the optimism of the scientific age (see Pascal’s great contribution to science, his awe of the great expense of the universe, his fear for man’s ignorance, and his almost apologetic reaction to a very personal ‘revelation’ of God (pp 348–50).

See also the viewpoints of others, such as: Descartes, his reference to Paul’s epistle to the Romans[41]; the apologetic approach of Lessius; references to Augustine’s viewpoint (pp 351--355); Isaac Newton (1642–1727) who tried to explain the ‘mechanics’ of the physical universe with God as an essential part of it (as in Aristotle where God was simply a continuation of the physical order) – an “intelligent divine Overseer” or “supremely intelligent Mechanick”, his critical study of the doctrine of the Trinity (p358) and his very strange treatise, *The philosophical Origins of Gentile Theology*. [42] This totally rational approach to religion was taken forward into the eighteenth century (e.g. the British John Toland, 1696: *Christianity Not Mysterious*; Matthew Tindal, 1730: *Christianity is as Old as Creation*).

The spreading of such radical ideas to the European continent invited a new breed of historians to examine church history objectively[43]. “It was disturbing for many of the faithful to see that fundamental dogmas about the nature of God had developed over the centuries and were not present in the New Testament itself”[44]. Although these studies were objective, they were based on the literal understanding of scripture and ignored the symbolic (metaphorical) nature of the faith – a kind of criticism that was “as irrelevant as it might be to art or poetry”. But once committed to a literal understanding of scriptures, “Western Christians had actually taken a step backwards from myth: a story was either factually true or it was a delusion (...) If Christians were to preserve their integrity in the scientific age, these questions had to be addressed”!

The new religion of reason, that would be known as Deism[45], eventually also discarded the myth of revelation and of traditional ‘mysteries’ such as the Trinity[46], “which had for so long held people in the thrall of superstition”. The philosophers of the Enlightenment did not reject the idea of God; they rejected the cruel God of the doctrines of the orthodox[47]. François-Marie de Voltaire, the ‘embodiment’ of the Enlightenment, pleaded for a religion that was as simple as possible, one that

was moral, credible ('common sense', without a crippling number of doctrines), without human bloodshed and strife, ..."one god, justice, tolerance and humanity"[48]. God, the Ground of being, was gradually replaced by the God of reason who served as a strategy for us to become more efficient and moral, more liberated. Kant was one of the first people in the West to doubt the validity of the "traditional proofs, showing that in fact they proved nothing".

Alongside this cool rationalism and newly-found liberty of the Enlightenment developed a new type of piety – the "religion of the heart" (p370), which shared many of the same preoccupations as Deism. But apart from abandoning "external proofs and authorities" it urged people to discover the God who was "within the heart and capacity of everybody" – see also the prominence given to being born-again, p371.[49]

I have sometimes been almost inclined to believe that the wisdom of God has, in most ages, permitted the external evidence for Christianity to be more or less clogged and encumbered for this very end, that men (of reflection especially) might not altogether rest there but be constrained to look into themselves also and attend to the light shining in their hearts.

John Wesley (1703–91) in *A Plain Account of Genuine Christianity*

This emotive (sentimental and frequently unhealthy) type of Christianity had also surfaced in the Roman Catholic Church in the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus[50], which established itself "in the face of much (suspicion and) opposition from the Jesuits and the establishment" (p372). Hope for liberty, equality and fraternity had surfaced in England (under Oliver Cromwell) some 140 years before the people of Paris stormed the Bastille" (p374). (In the apocalyptic excitement that rushed through 17th-century England even Cromwell seemed to have shared the belief that England was the place on earth where God would establish his Kingdom.) This seemed to have launched a succession of intellectual/counter-intellectual religiosities throughout the Western world, with remarkably similar developments within Judaism (see pp383–404).

"Social historians have noted that Western Christianity is unique among the world-religions for its violent alternations of periods of repression and permissiveness. They have also noted that the repressive phases usually coincide with a religious revival. The more relaxed moral climate of the Enlightenment would be succeeded in many parts of the West by the repressions of the Victorian period, which was accompanied by an upsurge of a more fundamentalist religiosity. In our own day we have witnessed the permissive society of the 1960s giving way to the more puritan ethic of the 1980s, which has also coincided with the rise of Christian fundamentalism in the West... It is tempting to connect (the cause of this "complex phenomenon") with the idea of God which Westerners have found problematic" (p378). "History shows that it is impossible to reconcile the so-called goodness of God with his omnipotence" (p404).

However, while the theologians of the Christian West had seized upon the new science of the Enlightenment to prove the objective reality of God "as though he could be tested and analysed like anything else", by the end of the century the more extreme mystics concluded: there was nothing out there. "It was not long before other scientists and philosophers triumphantly declared that God was dead."

Chapter 10: The Death of God?

The 19th century and atheism. Along with the advances in science and technology of this age came a new spirit of autonomy/independence. "This was the century in which Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, Charles Darwin, Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud forged philosophies and scientific interpretations of reality which had no place for God" (p406).

Atheism had come to stay, but this was not happening without agonising doubt and conflict. The anthropomorphic (theistic) God-idea that the Christian West had developed over centuries appeared now, in the age of reason, to be disastrously inadequate. Some new theologies evolved that translated religious dogmas and mysteries in a secular way. In a bid to 'save' God and 'systemise' truth, Western theology of the Post-Enlightenment age tended to over-emphasise the importance of rationality. In their efforts for creating a new truth they deprived the old religious themes of heaven/hell, birth/rebirth and redemption, of the super-natural Reality 'out there'. On the other hand, artists, poets and philosophers of the (Post-Enlightenment) Romantic Movement tried to elevate the importance of "the imaginative and intuitive activities of the human spirit" (see also the very interesting view re. 'natural supernaturalism', p407–411, of mystic poets on the imagination as a 'sacred faculty': Keats, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Blake and Schleiermacher – an 'ecstatic vision of reality coming from the heart').

Blake rebelled against the institutional churches and the 'fearful symmetry' of their inhumane God. He envisaged in his poems a kenosis, a self-emptying in God who becomes incarnate in the world. All human activity was now manifest in the passion of Jesus himself. "God has died involuntarily in Jesus and the transcendent, alienating God is no more. When the death of God is complete, the Human Divine Face will appear" (p410).

Jesus said: "Would thou love one who never died
For thee, or ever die for one who had not died for thee?
And if God dieth not for Man & giveth not himself
Eternally for Man, Man could not exist; for Man is Love
As God is Love: every kindness to another is a little Death
In the Divine Image, nor can Man exist but by brotherhood."
Jerusalem 96:23–8

The German Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) in his publication, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* (his own manifesto): "Religious faith could not be defined to the proportions of the creeds: it involved an emotional apprehension and an interior surrender. (...) When we had come to the limit of reason, feeling[51] would complete the journey to the Absolute." Ever since Thomas Aquinas, Western theology had shown a tendency to over-emphasise the importance of rationality. And even more so since the Reformation. To Schleiermacher, Christian creeds and doctrines were becoming more and more outmoded and even misleading, thereby making the faith vulnerable to the new scepticism. Schleiermacher attempted to redress the imbalance through his romantic theology. On his deathbed he said (p412): "I must think the deepest, speculative thoughts, and they are to me completely at one with the most intimate religious sensations." It seemed that concepts about God "were useless unless they were imaginatively transformed by feeling and personal experience" (p412).

During the 19th century, a row of well-reputed philosophers challenged what has become the 'traditional' (Catholic and Protestant) view of God in the West. Other monotheistic traditions were totally opposed to the theology of an objective, super-natural deity 'out there', which did not correspond to "the ineffable reality of which it was a mere symbol". They said it was more accurate to describe God as 'Nothing' rather than "the Supreme Being, since 'he' did not exist in any way that we could conceive. Over the centuries, the West had gradually lost sight of this more imaginative conception of God" (p413).[52]

Philosophers were increasingly condemning the old doctrines as flawed and inadequate; idols/ends in themselves/substitutes for the ineffable reality of God (Kierkegaard, p415); human projections that alienate us from our own nature, externalising the idea of God and making him an idol (Feuerbach, p415).

"Atheism had always been a rejection of a current conception of the divine" (p416)[53].

"Monotheists in all three religions had regarded the creation as a myth, in the most positive sense of the word: it was a symbolic account which helped men and women to cultivate a particular religious attitude." But in the West ... many people had come to see God as literally and physically responsible for everything that was happening on earth, in rather the same way as we ourselves make things or set events in motion" (p417). (In that way it seems, according to Nietzsche, had God been murdered by the West.)[54]

To Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929) religion was not simply the slavish observance of scripture, dogma or morality. It was an encounter with the divine.

It is impossible for us to meet God in any anthropomorphic way. God is the Ground of being, so bound up with our own existence that we cannot possibly talk to him as though he were simply another person like ourselves. There are no words or ideas that describe God.

F Rosenzweig

To him the commandments were obviously sacraments/symbolic actions, a means to bridge the gulf between human beings and God, "introducing Jews to the divine dimension that underlies the being of each one of us" (p435).

KA concludes: "He, Rosenzweig, would meet God in the symbolic gestures that were traditionally Jewish but a Christian would use different symbols. The doctrines about God were not primarily confessional statements but they were symbols of interior attitudes. The doctrines of creation and revelation, for example, were not literal accounts of actual events in the life of God and the world. The myths of revelation expressed our personal experience of God. Creation myths symbolised the absolute contingency of our human existence, the shattering knowledge of our utter dependence upon the Ground of being which made that existence possible. ... Rosenzweig's universal vision of religion made him suspicious of the new political Judaism that was emerging as a response to the new anti-Semitism" (see end par 1, p436).

The Author also touches onto the atheistic Zionism and the devotion to the Holy Land that "would give birth to the idolatry of Jewish fundamentalism in our own day" (pp436–39) and calls it a dangerous type of spirituality similar to Muslim fundamentalism. Many say that God had died in

Auschwitz. In many ways the Holocaust put an end to conventional theology. And also “(t)he remote God of the philosophers, lost in transcendent apatheia, becomes intolerable (...)”.

(The last paragraph of this chapter is a must-read: the story of the trial of God by Jews in Auschwitz for his cruelty and betrayal, and after the guilty verdict, the evening prayer – p441.)

Chapter 11: Has God a Future?

One may ask: Does the world have a future, with our tremendous ideological strife, our weapons of mass destruction and the possibility of escalating wars, ecological disaster, plagues, overpopulation, famine and droughts? Looking at how the idea of God has been adapted over 4000 years, how can he survive an “unimaginable future”? Then, on a more positive note: “We have a new intellectual freedom and can boldly follow up our own ideas without pussy-footing gingerly round difficult articles of faith, feeling all the while a sinking loss of integrity” (p443).

In her well-researched references to authors of the 20th century[55], the Author explores a variety of feelings, from desolation to a newly found liberty to the “God is dead” idea of Nietzsche and his enthusiastic followers of the 60s.

“God had indeed been used in the past to stunt creativity; if he is made a blanket answer to every possible problem and contingency, he can indeed stifle our sense of wonder and achievement. A passionate and committed atheism can be more religious than a weary or inadequate theism.” On the religious resistance to science and logic, she reminds: “Science has been felt to be threatening only by those Western Christians who got into the habit of reading the scriptures literally and interpreting doctrines as though they were matters of objective fact.” Their (subjective) ‘God’, or the idea which philosophers and scientists referred to as First Cause, could also not be proven or located within a physical system as an objective fact.

But why do we find it difficult to feel that new liberation? After slavery, the Holocaust and Hiroshima, many people today still live under the bondages of the past and seek comfort and meaning in the idea of God/religion (see Bart and Tillich). “A deep-rooted anxiety is part of the human condition”... (p448). But “(a) God who kept tinkering with the universe was absurd: a God who interfered with human freedom and creativity was a tyrant. ...An omnipotent, all-knowing tyrant is not so different from earthly dictators who made everything and everybody mere cogs in the machine which they controlled. An atheism that rejects such a God is amply justified. Instead we should seek to find a ‘God’ above this personal God”, the “Ground of being or ultimate concern”[56] (p449), a ‘God’ that is “fundamental to all our emotions of courage, hope and despair”. In forming their new conception of God, liberal theologians turned to the disciplines of science, psychology and sociology. [57] “God was immanent and incarnate in the world, which had become a sacrament of his presence (p450)”. But ... “Karl Rahner has developed a more transcendental theology, which sees God as the supreme mystery and Jesus as the decisive manifestation of what humanity can become.”

Pages 450–466 expand on these ideas of liberated theology and name authors and references from all religions/traditions, showing “a growing intolerance of inadequate images of the Absolute” and a need to heal the disastrous effect of the past. But this intolerance has a dangerous backspin: “One of

the most characteristic new developments since the 1970s has been the rise of a type of religiosity that we usually call 'fundamentalism' in most of the major world religions, including the three religions of God. A highly political spirituality, it is literal and intolerant in its vision." "Christian fundamentalists seem to have little regard for the loving compassion of Christ. They are swift to condemn the people they see as the 'enemies of God'. Most would consider Jews and Muslims destined for hellfire and ...all oriental religions inspired by the devil." [58] But this type of religiosity, this "fiercely reductive faith", is actually a retreat from God, making human, historical phenomena the focus of religious devotion and is – like 'Family Values' of biblical times, 'Islam' or the 'Holy Land' – a new form of idolatry. The Old Testament prophets of Israel tried to replace the old pagan tribal-God idea with compassion for all people. They insisted that cult and worship were useless unless society as a whole adapted a more just and compassionate ethos. Jesus, Paul and the Rabbis shared these ideals and suggested major changes in Judaism. The Koran made compassion and justice the essence of the reformed religion of al-Lah. But even conventional believers all too often have become so 'righteous' and egotistic, using 'God' to prop up their indulgences, their loves and hates, that they totally ignore the much more virtuous demands of mercy and compassion.

"If the human idea of God no longer works for us in the empirical age, it will be discarded." As in the past, we will continue to create new symbols to act as a focus for our spirituality. If we stop cultivating our sense of wonder in the "ineffable significance of life", the modern-life signs of "aimlessness, alienation, anomie and violence" will remain with us and we will fall into despair (p467).

May the "challenge of science shock the churches into a fresh appreciation of the symbolic nature of scriptural narrative" (p464). The literal idea of a personal God has become increasingly unacceptable for all kinds of reasons -- moral, intellectual, scientific and spiritual – and therefore even more remote [59].

While some 80% of people claim they believe in God and the 'instant' forms of religiosity are growing, escalating crime rates, drug addiction and the revival of the death penalty are not signs of a spiritually healthy society. On the other side of the coin there is a growing blankness, a "dry desolation" as depicted by Thomas Hardy (1900) in the poem "The Darkling Thrush". He expressed the "death of spirit that was no longer able to create a faith in life's meaning" (see poem, p467).

The author concludes...

Human beings cannot endure emptiness and desolation; they will fill the vacuum by creating a new focus of meaning. The idols of fundamentalism are not good substitutes for God; if we are to create a vibrant new faith for the twenty-first century, we should, perhaps, ponder the history of God for some lessons and warnings.

[1] 'pagan': meaning multi-god religions

[2] inverted commas indicating direct excerpts from Armstrong's text

[3] Italics: this reader's own reflections, accents or insertions for personal consideration

[4] Influences of these multi-god religions noticeable in the Old Testament; see Psalms for instance

[5] In contrast, paganism was an essentially tolerant faith

[6] author refers to the different traditions of E, J and P (E = Elohim tradition; J = Jewish tradition – from ‘Yahweh’; P = Priestly tradition), each adding its own perspective to the narratives

[7] remarkable resemblance between the symbolic Wisdom – Sophia in the Greek text of Proverbs (8:22, 23, 30, 31) and 1 John’s Logos (suggesting Jesus) – see also p6 of this summary

[8] Acts 17:28

[9] “In fact, Genesis had not made this claim. (...) Arius (had used as key passage) the description of the divine Wisdom in Proverbs, which stated explicitly that God created Wisdom at the very beginning” (see similarities with John chapter 1)

[10] already before the 4th century(!)

[11] see also Denys, or rather Pseudo-Denys, pp154–5

[12] and kept us entrapped in lasting guilt, until this present day!

[13] Al-Lah = the God

[14] Muruwah: see explanation, KA162–3

[15] qur’an: ‘the Recitation’, p165

[16] unfortunate the hijacking of religion by those (men) who interpreted (translated/edited) texts in a negative way for women

[17] “Like any other faith, Islam ... consequently evolved its own sects and division” (p190), like the Sunnah and Shiah

[18] translations brilliantly done (mostly) by Nestorian Christians

[19] falsafah: ‘philosophy’ with a richer meaning

[20] see different views of the Mutazilis, Asharites and Kalam, pp205–6

[21] see theologies of al-Kindi, ar-Razi (Iran), and al-Farabi (Turkey) with his doctrine of emanation, and the Ismaili batinis’ use of symbolism to reveal deeper truths, and the Iqwan al-Safa (Brethren of Truth) searching for the batin, pp207–15

[22] see next chapter

[23] Ten Phases of Being, p219

[24] Kalam = ‘debates’: in Muslim theology: the attempt to interpret the Koran in a literal way

[25] the Jewish philosophers (unlike the Faylasufs) did not concern themselves with the full range of philosophical science but concentrated almost entirely on religious matters

[26] see also Solomon ibn Gabirol (1026–1070), and others on ex nihilo, p221–2

[27] see Saadia ben Joseph (882–942), *Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, pp220–21

[28] see al-Rushd's arguments for true Falsafah as being only for the intellectual elite (the masses should be protected from being unnecessarily confused), p229; his 'creed' (8 obligatory doctrines) for approaching the Koran, to which even the Faylasufs should comply, p230

[29] Ibn Rushd's creed: (1) The existence of God; (2) The unity of God; (3) The incorporeality of God; (4) The eternity of God; (5) The prohibition of idolatry; (6) The validity of prophecy; (7) Moses was the greatest of the prophets; (8) The divine origin of truth; (9) The eternal validity of the Torah; (10) God knows the deeds of men; (11) He judges them accordingly; (12) He will send a Messiah; (13) The resurrection of the dead

[30] see pp232–3 for a description of the Via Negativa

[31] see paradoxical theology of Duns Scotus Erigena (810–877), pp235–237; he showed that "the Latins had much to learn from the Greeks"

[32] extra clause (the filioque clause) inserted into the Nicene Creed (at a synod of bishops in France, in 796): in order to emphasise the equality of the Father and the Son as opposed to Arian views (to solve a local dispute); the Latins insisted that "their own fathers had taught this doctrine"(!) and then they interpreted Augustine as backing; Charlemagne, who was not extremely well educated as to the theological background and implications, approved the new clause (which the Greeks naturally condemned), p238

[33] Anselm of Canterbury (11th century): it was possible to prove anything (about God) if you believed (pp240, 241); in contrast, see also the charismatic views and influence of Bernard of Clairvaux (pp241–243)

[34] theoria was not an intellectual opinion but a disciplined silence before the God who could only be known by means of religious and mystical experience

[35] theism = the theology of a personal God with human characteristics

[36] an early form of Jewish mysticism, which focused upon a description of the heavenly chariot (Merkavah) seen by the prophet Ezekiel and which took the form of an imaginary ascent through the halls (hekhaloth) of God's palace to his heavenly throne

[37] an ancient mystical practice delving beneath the once secretive wisdom of the Old Testament to achieve an understanding of God, the creation and the spiritual world itself

[38] see explanation, p304

[39] "The account of Creation (Genesis 1, 2), Calvin believed, was an example of balbutive (baby talk) which accommodated complex and mysterious processes to the mentality of simple people so that everybody could have faith in God. It was not to be taken literally" – Armstrong, p340, re. McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin*, p131

[40] see also *De revolutionibus*, (1530), a treatise by Copernicus on the centrality of the sun (KA, p340), and Bellarmine's literal location of Heaven and Hell

[41] Romans 1: 19–20: “For what can be known about God is perfectly plain to mankind since God himself has made it plain. Ever since God has created the world his everlasting power and deity – however invisible – have been there for the mind to see in the things he has made.”

[42] KA: “Newton had clearly no understanding of the role of mystery in the religious life. The Greeks had used the Trinity as a means of holding the mind in a state of wonder and as a reminder that human intellect could never understand the nature of God.”

[43] Gottfried Arnold, *History of the Churches from the Beginning of the New Testament to 1699*, “arguing that what was currently regarded as orthodox could not be traced back to the primitive church”; Johann Lorenz Von Mosheim (1694–1755) “deliberately separated history from theology in his magisterial *Institutions of Ecclesiastical History* (1726) and recorded the development of doctrine without arguing for their veracity”; George Walch, Giovanni But and Henry Noris “examined the history of difficult doctrinal controversies (i.e. Arianism, the Filogue dispute, and the various Christological debates of the fourth and fifth centuries); John Friedmann Mayer on Anselm and the doctrine of the atonement; the Puritan John Milton on the omniscience of God and the intolerance of the church

[44] see also Reimarus on the nature of Jesus, p360

[45] Deus: the “impersonal” God “which man could discover by his own efforts” (p363)

[46] see also Milton’s ‘incredible deity’ in *Paradise Lost* on the position of the Son, and God’s ‘foreknowledge’ of earthly events ...a rather forced ‘anthropomorphic and personalistic conception of the divine’ (p361–363)

[47] see also the emancipation of the Jews in Europe (Spinoza’s special brand of pantheism, pp365–367); Mendelsohn’s philosophical *God in Morning Hours*, and his philosophic defence of the immortality of the human soul in *Phaedon*, p368; Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), p369, to whom God was simply a convenience; and *A Plain Account of Genuine Christianity* by Johan Wesley (1703–91)

[48] Voltaire (1764): *Philosophical Dictionary*; see also his essay on “Atheism” in the Dictionary (KA: 364)

[49] Followers like the Wesley brothers or Count Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf (1706–60) felt they were shaking off the accretions of centuries and returning to “genuine” Christianity of Christ and the first Christians (see pp370–373)

[50] ...as the neurotic woman, Margaret Mary Alacoque had claimed Jesus had revealed himself to her (p372); see also other extremities such as similarities with the medieval Free Spirits (374), the Quakers and even more permissive Ranters in England (375–79), the Great Awakening in New England with hell-fire preaching of Jonathan Edwards (1703–58) and the alternating exaltation and suicidal despair of religious revivals in America (pp379–382)

[51] KA on Schleiermacher: feeling: not a sloppy emotionalism but an intuition, driving us towards the infinite. “Feeling was not opposed to human reason but an imaginative leap that takes us

beyond the particular to an apprehension of the whole. The sense of God thus acquired arose from the depths of each individual rather than a collision with an objective Fact.”

[52] see also similarity between Kabbalah and Kant/Hegel’s ‘new type of metaphysical anti-Semitism’, and Schopenhauer’s opposing view of salvation, p414–5

[53] see also the ideals of Marx , like Amos, Isaiah and Muhammad (1818–1885); Darwin and the doctrine of ex nihilo vs parables, signs, symbols

[54] see here also Freud, Adler, Jung, Dostoevsky and other’s ‘decoding’ of religious ideas; the desolation of unbelief and the cultural and economic hegemony (and colonisation) in the name of modernisation; the indiscriminate ‘lumping’ of Muslims with the Oriental religions and self-proclaimed superiority of the West and their idolatry of individualism; spreading anti-Semitism; and similarities between Rosenzweig’s existentialism and oriental religions, p419–35

[55] (p443 a.o.) Jean-Paul Satre (1905–80) and his God-shaped hole; Maurice Merleau Ponty (1908–61) on negating instead of increasing our sense of wonder; Albert Camus (1913–60) who preached a heroic form of atheism; the arguments of the Logical Positivists such as AJ Ayer (1910–91) on the meaninglessness of a statement that cannot be empirically verified or shown to be false (in both theism and atheism); William Hamilton’s *Radical Theology and the Death of God* (1960); Rubinstein on the Nazi Holocaust and his support of Isaac Luria’s doctrine of tsintsum (see Glossary p477, Gods voluntary act of self-estrangement which brought the created world into being) and Sartre’s human experience of nothingness, and more...

[56] Tillich preferred these terms to define this ‘God above God’

[57] The Liberal Christians of the 3rd century, Origen and Clement of Alexandria, introduced Platonism into the Semitic religion of Yahweh; the Jesuit Pierre de Chardin (1881–1955), a paleontologist with special interest in evolution, combined his belief in God with modern science; see also the American Daniel Day Williams’ *Process Theology* (1960)

[58] British fundamentalist Colin Urquhart

[59] see 1st par, p465 for “a possible alternative”, the God of the mystics; par 2 and further on; drawbacks