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The Case for God, by Karen Armstrong. Knopf. 2009. 432pp., hb., $27.95, ISBN-13: 9780307269188; pb., $16.95, 9780307389800.

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Theology, like any other discipline that works in a rational and orderly fashion, regularly adapts itself to the new learning of the age. The *Summa Theologicae* of Saint Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century, for example, was a total rethinking of Christian theology in Aristotelian terms: Aristotle had just been rediscovered by the West. And ironically the adaptation of Aristotle was not so much from translations into Western European languages, as from translations made from the original Greek into Arabic, by Arab scholars during the great flowering of Muslim civilization at the end of the first and beginning of the second millennium. It was only later, after the capture of Constantinople by the Turks in 1453, when Greek scholars and civil servants flooded into Western Europe, carrying their manuscripts with them, that the direct recovery of Ancient Greek civilization began in earnest.

The end of the second and beginning of the third millennium is likewise a period that has provoked its own re-examination and re-thinking of traditional theology, especially by those who make no claim to be professional theologians. There is an added irony that one of the most remarkable twentieth-century books of theology was written by a grandson of Thomas Huxley (known as Darwin's Bulldog, because of his dogged defence of Evolution): Aldous Huxley's *The Perennial Philosophy* (1945). In this work Huxley deliberately avoids the word *God*, replacing it by "the ground of all being", for very good theological reasons, a usage also followed, for example, by Paul Tillich in his *Systematic Theology* (1951, 1955). Huxley states his universalist view on the first page of his Introduction:

> Rudiments of the Perennial Philosophy may be found among the traditional lore of primitive peoples in every region of the world, and in its fully developed forms it has a place in every one of the higher religions. A version of this Highest Common Factor in all preceding and subsequent theologies was first committed to writing more than twenty-five centuries ago, and since that time the inexhaustible theme has been treated again

> and again, from the standpoint of every religious tradition and in all the principal languages of Asia and Europe.

Karen Armstrong, in *The Case for God*, has produced a work of equally universal scope, a history of the understanding of God from prehistoric times to the present day. Instead of avoiding the word *God* for its obvious pitfalls, however, she has chosen to make an explicit and extensive presentation of the pitfalls themselves: all human conceptions of the divine and numinous are inadequate, whether one uses a word or a phrase. This is, in fact, probably the most important point of all theology, and justifies the prayer that God's *name* should be *hallowed*: that whatever limited mortal concept of God we might have (a name always marks a concept) should at least be sanctified and respected (however inadequate), rather than condemned to embarrassing oversimplification or mindless idolatry.

Armstrong early makes the point that religion "was not primarily something that people thought, but something they did." Like music, dancing, or skiing, religion is something that one does, which produces a satisfaction that is often profound:

> Like any skill, religion requires perseverance, hard work, and discipline. Some people will be better at it than others, some appallingly inept, and some will miss the point entirely. But those who do not apply themselves will get nowhere at all. Religious people find it hard to explain how their rituals and practices work, just as a skater may not be fully conscious of the physical laws that enable her to glide over the ice on a thin blade. (xi–xii)

The book is divided into two equal and sensible divisions. The six chapters of Part I, *The Unknown God* (30,000 BCE to 1500 CE), trace the evolution, from human and animal sacrifices, through the tribal and local gods, to the practice of the Golden Rule (Chapter One), to a true monotheism in the Hebrew Bible (Chapter Two: *God*) where ultimately there are no other gods. Chapter Three (*Reason*) introduces the intellectualism of the Greeks. Four (*Faith*) brings us to the Rabbis, the Church Fathers, and the Qur'an: Five (*Silence*) takes us from Constantine to the Dark Ages. The sixth chapter entitled Faith and Reason takes us through the MiddleAges, from Anselm through Aquinas to Scotus and Ockham.

In Part II, Chapters 7–12 present the growth of modern views, from the turmoil of the Voyages of Discovery, the Renaissance, and the Reformation, to the new vistas of the Industrial and Scientific revolutions. Chapter Seven (*Science and Religion*) begins with Columbus, and Chapter Eight (*Scientific Religion*) takes us from the Reformation to Descartes. Chapter Nine (*Enlightenment*) introduces the eighteenth century, Chapter

Ten (*Atheism*) the nineteenth, and Chapter Eleven (*Unknowing*) runs the gamut from Einstein to Tillich, leading to Twelve (*Death of God?*).

The quality of some of these chapters is quite remarkable. Here, for example, is a long quote from Einstein, with an insightful comment at the end.

> The most beautiful emotion we can experience is the mystical. It is the sower of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger … is as good as dead. To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself to us as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty, which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their most primitive forms—this knowledge, this feeling is at the centre of all true religiousness. In this sense, and in this sense only, I belong to the ranks of devoutly religious men.
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> "Einstein emphatically did not subscribe to the personalized modern God. But many of the theologians whose work we have considered—Origen, the Cappadocians, Denys, and Aquinas—would have understood exactly what he meant." (268)

How true. All of these were soul-mates in their appreciation of what Pierre Teilhard de Chardin called the epiphany, the "shining through" of the divine at levels of profound scientific research and insight.

A pleasing aspect of the work is the sympathy that is given to atheism, whether of the classical style of Feuerbach, Marx, Nietsche, and Freud, or of the more recent style of Dawkins, Hitchens, and Harris, who, however, treat all religion as fundamentalism, and become fundamentalist themselves in so doing, as noted in the following.

> It is a pity that Dawkins, Hitchens, and Harris express themselves so intemperately, because some of their criticisms are valid. Religious people have indeed committed atrocities and crimes, and the fundamentalist theology the new atheists attack is indeed "unskillful," as the Buddhists would say. But they refuse, on principle, to dialogue with theologians who are more representative of mainstream tradition. As a result, their analysis is disappointingly shallow, because it is based on such poor theology. In fact the new atheists are not radical enough. Jewish, Christian, and Muslim theologians have insisted for centuries that God does not exist and that there is "nothing" out there; in making these assertions, their aim was not to deny the reality of God but to safeguard God's transcendence. In our talkative and highly opinionated society, however, we seem to have lost sight of this important tradition that could solve many of our current religious problems. (xvi)

Armstrong (who began her career as a nun in a convent) expresses sympathy with the irritation of the new atheists, because of her own early

rejection of traditional religion, admitting that some of her early books "definitely tended to the Dawkinsesque" (xvii). But she found that the study of world religion not only opened her mind to other traditions, but enabled also a different perspective on Christianity, "that qualified the parochial and doctrinal faith of my childhood" (xvii). "One of the things I have learned is that quarreling about religion is counterproductive and not conducive to enlightenment": comments and a conclusion that certainly resonate with the concept articulated by the title of this journal.

There are 35 pages of endnotes, reflecting an extraordinary range of background reading, a glossary of 10 pages, and a selected bibliography of 12 pages. The whole is a genuine *tour de force*, a scholarly work of remarkable breadth and depth.

References

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