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**Karen Armstrong's Cheshire Cat Compassionate God**

*What makes the best "case for God" to a skeptic or non-believer, an open-minded seeker, a person of faith?*

Karen Armstrong has the virtue of irritating people whose Ideas I dislike and the vice of irritating me. She's creative enough - in her long musing on religion and the religions - to irritate everybody. The *virtue*derives from her giving God some needed press-coverage among the chattering classes. The ironic *vice* is that her pastiche construct of the divine, intended as a greater god, reduces the divine to an ethereal "it" describable in ethics as compassion and as transcendence in metaphysics, but unrecognizable in any of the world's living religions as God. Even she doesn't pray to it.

1.....As a public intellectual in media coverage, Armstrong is a refreshing*counterpoise* both to old literalists (who confuse words with truth) and to the so-called New Atheists (who narrow truth down to facts). "The Case for God" is her latest ad, with a more polemic edge and therefore loud-pedal effect for her "case," the point of view of her oeuvre. I applaud it (and her interviews on it) as providing some needed public-square intellectual respectability to religious thought.

2.....Since the Enlightenment, reason - which formerly was a servant of TRUTH - has increasingly become captive to verifiable/falsifiable FACT, a captivity Darwin so feared that he long delayed publication of his "The Origin of Species," whose title-page he faced with this quotation from father-of-science Francis Bacon (on *truth in the Bible and in nature*): "Let no man think or maintain that a man can search too far or be too well studied in the book of God's word, or in the book of God's works...."

3....But the West's most influential thinkers turned Bacon/Darwin's unity of religion and science into the warfare of evolution or God. Impoverishing both science and religion, this *mutual alienation* unmoored Europe from its cultural past. Today, "for most modern Europeans," "'a good definition of religion'" "might be" "an irrational opinion, strongly held." (Paul Marshall quoting, in the 9.18.09 WSJ, Christopher Caldwell, whose "Reflections on the Revolution in Europe" he is reviewing.) Some of such Europeans find fellow-European Armstrong's reasoning-ability unsettling. I find unsettling her conceding too much to evolutionism,*unnecessarily abandoning the personal God of the Bible*.

4.....*"Unnecessarily*," I say. The Darwin of 1859 was against capturing evolution for atheism. All the early editions of "Origin," including my 6th, had this as their last sentence: "There is a grandeur in this view of life,...having been originally breathed by the Creator, into a few forms or into one...." In his Petts Wood (greater London) home, Darwin aficionado Eric Evans showed me his complete set of first-editions of Darwin's works, then put in my hands his copy of the first edition of "Origin," and had me read aloud that last sentence. (How did the references to "the Creator" and "the Deity" get dropped out of later editions? That remains in dispute. An irony: While "the Creator" disappeared from the book's last sentence, God's breath remains.)

5....."The best 'case for God'" is Darwin's original case, interadjusting the Bible and science. Dr. Rosenberger, 73 years ago In Philosophy 101, used the phrase "*theistic evolution*" to convince us of this. Under various phrases it was a common view among American intellectuals before World War 2, as I discovered in doctoral studies at the University of Chicago before "Pearl Harbor." There I came to know, as a fellow Sunday-school teacher, Arthur Compton, who was known on campus as the dean of physics, and whom history knows as the supervisor under whom the Atomic Age was born in the world's first nuclear chain reaction.

6.....Armstrong never has gotten her whole self into any particular religion. Her seven-year nunnery experience was never whole-hearted: "Oh, that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest [in] the quiet of the wilderness." (Not her words, but words of Psalm 55 matching her mood.) She left, and for thirteen years flew around in the wilderness of God-amnesia until she alighted in the library of religious books and books on religion, where her head has been ever since, and makes its public appearance in the form of more books on religion.

7.....Her *head*, I said. Lewis Carroll's wonderland king's intention to decapitate the Cheshire Cat was frustrated by the appearance of the cat's smiling disembodied live head; and we know that that fantasy escape-artist's head could fade into invisibility, leaving only the smile to be seen. Armstrong and her fantasy deity smile, and preach compassion. But "it" smells of the library rather than the street, and she does not pray to it. But we God-believers can be grateful to her for insisting that there is a there there, which is an ever-so-small but real*advance on atheism*.

**BY WILLIS E. ELLIOTT  |  OCTOBER 9, 2009; 2:44 PM ETSAVE & SHARE:                       
PREVIOUS:**[**THANKS, BUT NO THANKS, FROM A HAPPY ATHEIST**](http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/susan_jacoby/2009/10/thanks_but_no_thanks_from_a_happy_atheist.html)**| NEXT:**[**TO KNOW GOD, TASTE THE SUGAR**](http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/aseem_shukla/2009/10/to_know_god_taste_the_sugar.html)

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Darwin's early inability to see the extent of the force of his argument against the bible is no argument but that a man has difficulty giving up his chosen ignorance.

The enlightenment, scientific epistemology have not been lost to the modern world. The mono-ideologists have fought it tooth and nail. The christo-islamists insist that they are the final arbiters of truth, even in spite of the evidence. The fact that scientific method is giving us more information than the mono-ideologists can handle does not mean we have lost sight of the truth, only that they continue to defend their belief in ignorance.

There is still a there there. Ho ho ho. There is a north pole so there must be a santa claus. The fact that your science didn't find him is proof of the inadequacy of science. And yes Virginia, there is a Santa Claus, for we can redefine Truth whenever it suits our mono-ideological purpose.

humbug.

hariaum

**POSTED BY: NAVIN1 | OCTOBER 12, 2009 12:13 AM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

I often like the essays of Mr. Elliott, and I liked this one as well. I certainly like his honesty and wit. And there is enough in Ms. Armstrong to make some fun of. Of course, that may be true with all, but some just are easier work to make fun of.

That said, one wonders at the issue that Mr. Elliott takes of Ms. Andersons non-personalized version of God. What, is the line drawn for you, Mr. Elliott, when God no longer has a face to "identify" with, is not a definable and locatable and available to attach attributes and tendencies and emotions to?

I understand, for that is how we as humans perceive and label the world, assigning it qualities and compartments. Make it 'good' and 'bad'.

I do not believe that God is personalized, as the Bible has presented. God is far greater that that, as you should know or at least Believe. God MUST be far greater than personalization could afford. IT, (did I desexualize God here? for shame!), by being ALL, must be so.

We are 'egos', personalities, personas. We have the hardest time accepting what cannot be defined. The very nature of Unlimited and Unknowable well falls into that category.

The Bible works against Union, in part by it's seeking to define for others what is not definable.

It is here that I have great respect for the Cheshire Cat.

**POSTED BY: JUSTILLTHENNOW | OCTOBER 11, 2009 12:30 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

Which God to you believe in Rev. Elliot? The God of Justice and compassion? Or the God who incarnated himself as a man-god, reintroduced human sacrifice, which should have ended with the binding of Isaac?

That God, God the murderer, the essentialist? Who indicts humankind for the "NT" "sins" of Adam and Eve? Who then holds them hostage for all time for the torture/slaying He arranged?

That God, the God of do what you will but believe in me at the eleventh hour and yer saved, as it were? Do good, commit to justice, but doubt, disbelieve and yer damned?

And the legacy of that god? Two thousand years of unimaginable carnage.

**POSTED BY: FARNAZ1MANSOURI1 | OCTOBER 10, 2009 5:15 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

The big idea: God remains an unconvincing hypothesis however the likes of both Willis Elliot of Karen Armstrong may wish to try. Given two thousand years to make the case for such a reality, the whole of 'tradition' appears rather vacuous to the modern mind. That does not necessarily negate the idea of God, but is certainly gives licence to question those who would make claims on behalf of such a potential.

And if the religious lack the critical self scrutiny to question their ideas, such questioning may about to be forced upon them, Not by any atheist brigade, but by a new interpretation of the moral teaching of Christ spreading on the web. Quoting a review of The Final Freedoms:

"Using a synthesis of scriptural material from the Old and New Testaments, the Apocrypha , The Dead Sea Scrolls, The Nag Hammadi Library, and some of the worlds great poetry, it describes and teaches a single moral LAW, a single moral principle, and offers the promise of its own proof; one in which the reality of God responds directly to an act of perfect faith with a individual intervention into the natural world; correcting human nature by a change in natural law, altering biology, consciousness and human ethical perception beyond all natural evolutionary boundaries. Intended to be understood metaphorically, where 'death' is ignorance and 'Life' is knowledge, this experience, personal encounter of transcendent power and moral purpose is the 'Resurrection', and justification for faith."

"Here then is the first ever viable religious conception capable of leading reason, by faith, to observable consequences which can be tested and judged. This new teaching delivers the first ever religious claim of insight into the human condition, that meets the Enlightenment criteria of verifiable and 'extraordinary evidence' based truth embodied in action. For the first time in history, however unexpected, the world must now measure for itself, the reality of a new moral tenet, offering access by faith, to absolute proof for its belief."

Could two thousand year of theological exegesis and tradition be in error? We may finally have an answer. Revolutionary stuff for those who can handle it!

Links at [**http://www.energon.org.uk**](http://www.energon.org.uk/)

**POSTED BY: GOLIAH | OCTOBER 10, 2009 12:43 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

How do you distinguish truth from fact, I wonder? Scientists of a philosophical bent will agree, generally, that facts are evidentially fixed conventions, subject to change in the light of new evidence. Absolute truth, they will agree, is something that only mathematics can claim with universal agreement. Surely, you will agree that there is no universal agreement on any religious claim whatever. That is a fact. Moreover, the personal god of traditional monotheism is a claim that if drawn into the realm of fact becomes easily falsifiable. (See, for example, Victor Stenger's recent book.) It is ludicrous to suppose that a perfect, personal God, in charge of everything, would allow tsunamis like the one that recently struck. A second-rate engineer, put in charge of designing a planet for habitation, could do better. Hidden higher good in tragedy, such as Swinburne posits, might make sense \*if\* this personal God communicated directly with his victims. But he doesn't. He relies on prophets and missionaries to get the Word out. And there is such a tangle of words out there that no one knows the truth about Him. So, I am puzzled by your objection to Armstrong's position.

**POSTED BY: CLAYNAFF | OCTOBER 10, 2009 9:18 AM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

Which God do you believe in, Rev. Elliot, the one who helped the Israelites slay the Caananites or the one who sent his only son to save all humanity? Speaking of evolution, apparently God himself is not immune from change.

Go figure and let me know. While you're at it, perhaps you can make me understand God's peculiar sense of proportion. We get three score and ten to make a case for good or ill for our eternal fate. That is one strange sense of proportion.

For many, they look at these questions and decide the sellers of spiritual ideas are all frauds. However, happily, there are ideas about the transcendent that do not conflict with any science and do not anthropomorphize a mystic reality in order to communicate about "it". Oh yeah, "it" aggravates you. Sorry.

**POSTED BY: EDBYRONADAMS | OCTOBER 9, 2009 10:43 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

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