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A History of God: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam review

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Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993).

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Karen Armstrong says that her book is not “a history of the ineffable reality of God itself, which is beyond time and change, but a history of the way[s] men and women have perceived him from Abraham to the present day” (xx). Armstrong begins this adventure of ideas with the Babylonian creation myth two millennia before Christ and ends with speculations about God in the twentieth century. She summarizes a bewildering variety of perspectives, and the panorama of the “history of God” that she unveils is breathtaking.

Perhaps the book’s best feature is that Christianity has no privileged status. Armstrong admirably demonstrates that Judaism is no mere prelude to Christianity and Islam is not its coda. At a time when Jews and Muslims are often judged by their most radical members, Armstrong’s moderation is refreshing. On the other hand, she does not always do [462] justice to Christian figures. For instance, John Philoponus’s importance to Kalam argumentation is overlooked. Or again, Kabbalistic and Sufi mysticism are ably canvassed but medieval Christian mystics like Hildegard of Bingen, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Hadewijch of Antwerp are not mentioned.

Unfortunately, a number of errors mar the text. Aristotle’s universe is said to emanate from and be created by the unmoved mover (68-69); neither is true. Al-Kindi’s first cause argument is bungled; it does not proceed from the premise that *everything* has a cause to the contradictory conclusion that there is a wholly impassible deity (174). Armstrong also misunderstands Anselm’s famous modal argument (202); she fails to appreciate that it occurs in the context of a prayer (*fides quaerens intellectum*) and that his rationalism is balanced by the claim that God is “greater than can be conceived.” Finally, an important but minor player is identified as the founder of process theology, while the doyen of the movement, Charles Hartshorne, goes unnoticed (384). Despite a few missteps, the book is a heroic effort by a very knowledgeable person.

Armstrong is finally more successful in constructing a historical narrative than in avoiding the quagmire of her own theological hunches. Themes iterated throughout are that God is “Nothing”; God is subjective experience revealed only in the imagination; and God is ineffable (then why say that God is “beyond time and change”?). On these assumptions it is incoherent to claim that religious experiences are experiences *of* anything, including the ineffable. Yet, Armstrong confidently uses these ideas as a platform from which she accuses “objective” and

“anthropomorphic” theologies of being naïve and contributing to intolerance, bigotry, and “the death of God.”

Would-be theologians should doubtless heed Karl Rahner’s warning that “Theology knows well enough that stammering is all it can do.” Yet, nonsense is still nonsense, even when it is about God. If God is not, *in some sense*, existent, objective, and effable, then we should admit atheism or be silent. The alternative is to take the question of religious language as seriously as Aquinas, Duns Scotus and others have done and thereby offset Armstrong’s silence on the topic. Wittgenstein said that philosophical problems begin when language goes on holiday. Perhaps theological problems begin when language takes a permanent vacation. Armstrong is altogether too eager to pack her bags.