Theologian argues for religious transcendence

by: GLENN C. ALTSCHULER
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In "A Letter on the Blind for the Use of Those Who See" (1749), the fictional dialogue that put Denis Diderot in prison, Nicholas Sanderson, the blind Cambridge mathematician, can find nothing more than a brutal process of natural selection in the world. He asks Gervase Holmes, an Anglican minister, why God has deprived him of eyes. "My friend," he concludes, "confess your ignorance."

It is essential not to mistake hemlock for parsley, Diderot would later add, "but to believe or not to believe in God is not important at all." In the modern era, a growing number of people agreed with him.

In "The Case For God" — an informative and immensely insightful survey of the evolution of sacred experiences from the prehistoric era to the present — Karen Armstrong suggests that as faith became identified with belief in man-made opinions, and was no longer "actualized by the practical activity of ritual," God "for all intents and purposes has died or gone away."

Religion, she argues, provocatively, was never supposed to answer questions that lay within the scope of human reason. A practical discipline whose insights are not derived from abstract thinking "but from spiritual exercises and a dedicated lifestyle," religion, at its best, induces "a transcendence" that helps believers live compassionately and "affirm their suffering with serenity and courage."

By replacing "a delight in unknowing" with a conviction that God's attributes could be "charted, measured and definitively proven," Armstrong demonstrates, Enlightenment thinkers unwittingly turned him into "a mere human projection," a watchmaker, who promised not to interfere with human freedom. This God, to whom it seemed pointless to pray, would fade further when a new generation of scientists found another explanation for the origins of the universe.

These days, Armstrong asserts, because "faith" implies intellectual assent to a set of doctrines that make no sense if they're not applied practically, "some have given up altogether." While others, who are reluctant to abandon religion, are caught between two extremes: fundamentalists, "whose belligerent piety they find alienating," and militant atheists, "calling for the wholesale extermination of religion."

In modern theology, Armstrong identifies a viable alternative. Born of the conviction that the Enlightenment died at Auschwitz, it teaches adherents to look "unflinchingly in the heart of a great darkness," enter into "the cloud of unknowing," and embrace the imprecision of symbolic discourse. Along with Paul Tillich, who fled the Nazis in 1933 and emigrated to the United States, Armstrong embraces God as "being itself beyond essence and existence." And, indeed, that to argue even that God exists is to deny him, by making him, at once, into an idol — and just another being.

Although she does not idealize the past, does not equate religious experience with "fervid emotional piety," and does not offer all that many specific suggestions, Armstrong urges pious people to spend more time devising spiritual exercises that will make "belief" (which once meant trust, commitment and engagement) a living reality and less time enforcing doctrinal conformity. They might begin, she suggests, by "stepping outside their own preferences" through meditation, yoga and the habitual practice of compassion.

The case for God
Karen Armstrong
Alfred A. Knopf, $27.95

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.
Karen Armstrong, author of "The Case For God." Courtesy