

# Karen Armstrong says we need God to grasp the wonder of our existence

**R**ICHARD DAWKINS HAS BEEN RIGHT all along, of course—at least in one important respect. Evolution has indeed dealt a blow to the idea of a benign creator, literally conceived. It tells us that there is no Intelligence controlling the cosmos, and that life itself is the result of a blind process of natural selection, in which innumerable species failed to survive. The fossil record reveals a natural history of pain, death and racial extinction, so if there was a divine plan, it was cruel, callously prodigal and wasteful. Human beings were not the pinnacle of a purposeful creation; like everything else, they evolved by trial and error and God had no direct hand in their making. No wonder so many fundamentalist Christians find their faith shaken to the core.

But Darwin may have done religion—and God—a favor by revealing a flaw in modern Western faith. Despite our scientific and technological brilliance, our understanding of God is often remarkably undeveloped—even primitive. In the past, many of the most influential Jewish, Christian and Muslim thinkers understood that what we call “God” is merely a symbol that points beyond itself to an indescribable transcendence, whose existence cannot be proved but is only intuited by means of spiritual exercises and a compassionate lifestyle that enable us to cultivate new capacities of mind and heart.

But by the end of the 17th century, instead of looking through the symbol to “the God beyond God,” Christians were transforming it into hard fact. Sir Isaac Newton had claimed that his cosmic system proved beyond doubt the existence of an intelligent, omniscient and omnipotent creator, who was obviously “very well skilled in Mechanics and Geometry.” Enthralled by the prospect of such cast-iron certainty, churchmen started to develop a scientifically-based theology that eventually made Newton’s Mechanick and, later, William Paley’s Intelligent Designer essential to Western Christianity.

But the Great Mechanick was little more than an idol, the kind of human projection that theology, at its best, was supposed to avoid. God had been essential to Newtonian physics but it was not long before other sci-

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entists were able to dispense with the God-hypothesis and, finally, Darwin showed that there could be no proof for God’s existence. This would not have been a disaster had not Christians become so dependent upon their scientific religion that they had lost the older habits of thought and were left without other resource.

Symbolism was essential to premodern religion, because it was only possible to speak about the ultimate reality—God, Tao, Brahman or Nirvana—alogically, since it lay beyond the reach of words. Jews and Christians both developed audaciously innovative and figurative methods of reading the Bible, and every statement of the Quran is called an ayah (“parable”). St Augustine (354-430), a major authority for both Catholics and Protestants, insisted that if a biblical text contradicted reputable science, it must be interpreted allegorically. This remained standard practice in the West until the 17th century, when in an effort to emulate the exact scientific method, Christians began to read scripture with a literalness that is without parallel in religious history.

Most cultures believed that there were two recognized ways of arriving at truth. The Greeks called them mythos and logos. Both were essential and neither was superior to the other; they were not in conflict but complementary, each with its own sphere of competence. Logos (“reason”) was the prag-

Religion is a kind of art form that, like music or painting, introduces us to a new mode of knowledge.

matic mode of thought that enabled us to function effectively in the world and had, therefore, to correspond accurately to external reality. But it could not assuage human grief or find ultimate meaning in life’s struggle. For that people turned to mythos, stories that made no pretensions to historical accuracy but should rather be seen as an early form of psychology; if translated into ritual or ethical action, a good myth showed you how to cope with mortality, discover an inner source of strength, and endure pain and sorrow with serenity.

In the ancient world, a cosmology was not regarded as factual but was primarily therapeutic; it was recited when people needed an infusion of that mysterious power that had—somehow—brought something out of primal nothingness: at a sickbed, a coronation or during a political crisis. Some cosmologies taught people how to unlock their own creativity, others made them

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