

Karen Armstrong, Turn, Turn, Turn

[Dave Weich](#), Powells.com

Salon.com calls Karen Armstrong "arguably the most lucid, wide-ranging and consistently interesting religion writer today." "Magisterial and brilliant," *Kirkus* tagged her 1993 breakthrough bestseller *A History of God*.

The *Economist* praises Armstrong's biography of Muhammad as "respectful without being reverential, knowledgeable without being pedantic, and, above all, readable." That about sums up her overwhelming popular and critical appeal. Her voice is filled with a generous, sober compassion; her perspective is inclusive, but never reductive.

"When I've been going around talking about Islam and fundamentalism, as I've done regularly since 9/11 and even before then," she explained at Powell's, "there would nearly always be a question: 'How did you come to this?' So, there's been an interest in my life somehow. That's one of the reasons that I agreed to write [*The Spiral Staircase*]."



In 1969, at the age of twenty-four, Karen Armstrong left the Roman Catholic convent she had entered as a teenager. She returned to a changed world. Unrecognizable. Vietnam, The Beatles, feminism, the sexual revolution... But more affecting was this: she had tried, and failed, to find God.

Before she became one of the English-speaking world's foremost commentators on religion, Armstrong weathered anorexia and depression alongside fainting spells and blackouts due to epilepsy that went undiagnosed for years.

Now she shares the story of her return — bit-by-bit, step-by-step — to secular life. The *Spiral Staircase* is "a story about becoming human," the *Washington Post* declared, "being recognized, finally recognizing oneself."

Dave: I noticed that you're wrapping up a month-long tour of America, and I wondered whether you've heard particular questions again and again as you travel from city to city.

Karen Armstrong: Apart from the current political situation and Islam and fundamentalism, it's been "How can we deal with the rising intolerance in this country?" Religious-based intolerance, I'm speaking of: religious certainty. America seems to be very riled up at the moment about religion. Not just the Al Qaeda threat, but also Bush and his politics, his sense of being inspired by God. There's been a lot of "How do we redeem our religions? What can we do?"

A lot of people have come out of the woodwork and said, "I was in the seminary" or "I was in the convent." Others, they bear no relation to you on the surface, to my own story,

and yet I think the book has helped them find a morphology through which they can look at their own journey and passages.

Compassion, the meaning of compassion — that comes up a lot. And, "What is the role of belief in faith? Do you believe in God?" I point out that that's a very Christian question, a very Western, modern question. It's not actually the proper question, but nevertheless it's what people want to know. For them, that is *the* question.

Dave: And what is the question that you prefer to ask instead?

Armstrong: I say that religion isn't about believing things. It's ethical alchemy. It's about behaving in a way that changes you, that gives you intimations of holiness and sacredness.

People have such clear ideas of what God is — you know: creator, father, personality watching over me. It's not what I believe in, even though I like to use the word sometimes. So people will ask, "Is traditional faith wrong?" And I say, "No." It doesn't really matter what you believe as long as it leads you to practical compassion. If your belief in a traditional God makes you come out imbued with a desire to feel with your fellow human beings, to make a place for them in your heart, to work to end suffering in the world, then it's good. Nobody has the last word on God, whether they're conservative or liberals.

Dave: You write in *The Spiral Staircase* about achieving ecstatic moments through study, which you recognize as part of Jewish tradition. How do readers relate to that idea?

Armstrong: Not many people spend their life studying religion, let's be frank. No, this is just for me. I'm not putting my life forward as some kind of blueprint for other people; this is just a memoir. But Jewish people recognize it. As I've written, in the Leo Baeck College where I teach, as soon as I shared the idea for the first time, Lionel Bloom, my boss, said, "This is very, very Jewish."

My point is that we've all got to find our own form of prayer, our own form of worship. Being dragooned into one, as I was when I was young, is not going to do any good. There are myriad forms of spirituality. You've got to find the right one for you.

Dave: In the new book, you describe waking up in a hospital and being told that you'd tried to commit suicide. But you had no recollection of doing it. You'd blacked out. Somehow, through years of fainting and blackouts, you'd never been tested for any kind of physical ailment. It wasn't until years later that you were diagnosed with epilepsy. How could that have happened?

Armstrong: I don't know. Within the convent, as it were, I think it speaks in part to a danger in the compartmentalization of religion; people find it difficult to think outside their specialty. So much specialization might mean that they're not willing to look elsewhere for answers. And as I say in the book, there's still a resistance to the idea. Even

today, there are friends of mine who insist that the whole thing is psychosomatic. A lot of friends of mine in London are psychotherapists, not with a medical training, true, but they find it very difficult to believe that something that produces an emotional reaction is physically based. It goes against their thought. It seems to be a prejudice of our post-Freudian age that everything has got to be boiled down to the psyche.

Dave: When you were younger, you read Tennyson and felt a profound connection to his work. It must have made so much sense when you were diagnosed.

Armstrong: Absolutely. Of course I was drawn to the man! He was anguished by the same kinds of symptoms. It was the great black threat that hung over his entire life. His brother was incarcerated in a home for the same reason. His father died of epilepsy. It was called "the black curse of the Tennysons." That was a moment of revelation for me, yes.

Neurology seems utterly fascinating in the whole process of religion and art. Think of people like Van Gogh — you can see it in those tormented canvasses, the kind of vision he had. And apparently we write a lot, too. Not always to any great effect, but think of Dostoevsky's great fat novels. It's all very interesting.

Dave: Being on tour and talking about yourself now in support of this memoir, how is that different than promoting one of your other books? Many of the people in attendance probably know you best from your critical studies.

Armstrong: When I say that I was unable to pray, sometimes you can almost feel a sigh of relief going up, that someone has dared to say that. Or when I say that I felt I was better off without religion, or that I don't think believing in things matters, you feel people relaxing somehow.

If readers aren't interested in my story, that's fine. I tell you what, though: Frequently, reviewers have said about *The Battle for God*, for example, I remember one whole paragraph saying, "We have no notion of what Ms. Armstrong herself feels about these things. Is she doing this as a scholar? Is she a skeptic? Is she a Catholic?" That's repeated quite often.

Also, when I've been going around talking about Islam and fundamentalism, as I've done regularly since 9/11 and even before then, there would nearly always be a question: "How did you come to this?" So, there's been an interest in my life somehow. That's one of the reasons that I agreed to write it, the persistence of these questions, rather like when I wrote my first book, *Through the Narrow Gate*, because people were endlessly asking me about the convent. *What was it like in there?* I could then say, "Read the book."

Because I don't belong to an affiliated church, nor an affiliated university, and I'm very much a freelancer, I think people do want to know where I stand.

Dave: People are desperate for this kind of information: objective, knowledgeable perspectives on other belief systems. You were just seventeen when you joined the convent. You hadn't yet been exposed to other faiths. Most people haven't at such a young age.

Armstrong: No, though people are more and more doing it now. Alongside the sectarianism that is growing, the fact that we are living cheek by jowl with people of other faiths, the fact that our world has shrunk to a global village, means that for a long time and in a most unsung way people have been spontaneously reaching out to other faiths. More Christians read Martin Buber than Jews. Jews read Paul Tillich and Harvey Cox. And Jesuits have long been learning meditation from Buddhist monks. Because there's more information now than there was, I think people are doing it not in a principled way but spontaneously. Rumi, for example: People are reading him in droves in the West. Sufism is very popular. My little book on the Buddha was very popular. What we need in this world right now is a dose of the Buddha's good sense, I think: low-key spirituality.

I think this is in the zeitgeist now; people are doing it. Since 9/11, Americans in particular have become aware that now it's not just a nice thing to do; it's imperative to learn. And we've got to bring up our children to know about other religions. Everybody, not just the West. When I go to mosques or synagogues, I'll say the same thing. We've got to know more about each other's religions so we don't harbor distorted, inaccurate images. It's too dangerous.

Dave: Part of the motivation for you to write A History of God was the realization that the three major religions have so much in common. That's not an assumption most people would make.

Armstrong: No, and similarly in my next book I'm going to look at the history of the Axial Age, which is when all the great world religions come into being. I'll be looking at Hinduism and the Chinese, Confucius and the Taoists, and the Greeks, too. Again you see the same profound similarities, the same issues coming up, and that's quite endorsing, actually. Instead of seeing your own tradition as an idiosyncratic, lonely quest, it becomes part of what human beings do, part of a universal search for meaning and value. This is the kind of scenario that the human mind goes through in its search for ultimate meaning.

Dave: It's reaffirming to think that people with no contact, in vastly different geographical areas, would ask similar questions and reach many of the same conclusions.

Armstrong: Jews, Christians, and Muslims, as I say in that book, working in isolation — and often in deadly hostility to one another — still come up with the same questions, the same values. That tells us something about our humanity, and it *is* affirming.

Dave: In The Battle for God, you explain that the West has had hundreds of years to evolve toward the religious and cultural order we now inhabit. But that order is now being artificially imposed in developing parts of the world.

Armstrong: And accelerated. It's all happening at too great a speed. With us, there were centuries in which these ideas could trickle down from the intellectuals, from people like Locke down through various routes, often through religion, to the ordinary person in the street or the pew. There's not been time in various parts of the developing world; it's all been too quick. What can be done about it? They can't just take three hundred years over. They've got to modernize yesterday, and that is causing a lot of problems.

Dave: And yet something needs to be done. A person could say to the West, "Stop imposing your way of life," but realistically it's unlikely to change; globalization isn't going to stop.

Armstrong: No, it isn't. I wrote about this at the end of Muhammad. Wilfred Cantwell Smith wrote a little book on modern Islam in 1956 [Islam in Modern History] — the book was printed just before the Suez crisis, when everything changed. Already he could see we were heading for trouble. He said, first of all, that the Muslim world has got to accept the West; their religion says that you must see things as they are, so Muslims must accommodate the West and not feel this dreadful dismay; they've got to get over it. But equally, the Christian world and the West have got to recognize that they share the planet not with inferiors but with equals. If we both don't achieve this, Cantwell Smith said, we will have failed the test of the twentieth century. September 11 shows that none of us did too well on that.

I think it's a question of attitude. We mustn't regard these other traditions with thinly veiled contempt or fail to recognize the very real difficulties they're having in the course of modernization. We can't sweep reality under the carpet, saying, "Come, come. Surely they can get together a modern democratic society by this time."

It took us a long, long time even to get votes for women. It was the 1930s or something before a woman could earn a degree and be an accredited B.A. at Oxford and Cambridge. People were able to do that because our cultures were on a roll and we felt empowered enough to ask the impossible. We demanded from our masters, in Britain and here in the States, more enfranchisement and a larger share in the decision-making. This was a *demand*. In parts of the developing world, people feel so disenfranchised now that they don't have that spirit of freedom to demand democracy.

You've got to feel that your vote makes a difference. Even in our countries. Less than half the population turned out to vote for Tony Blair last time. That means that even though he has a huge majority in Parliament, he has no mandate from the country because people don't feel that their vote makes the slightest bit of difference. I suppose what I'm saying is that we must try in our policies, as we now look at this new world that we entered on 9/11, to empower people and not make them feel like there's nothing they can do.

Dave: But in regards to fundamentalism, as differently as it may have manifested in each religion, something all fundamentalists share is the fear of annihilation, the fear that their way of life will not survive. And it's a legitimate fear.

Armstrong: It's true. In the Muslim countries, that has been immensely true. In Judaism, fundamentalism took major leaps forward, first just after the Holocaust, then again after the 1973 war when Israel suddenly felt vulnerable again and felt its isolation in the Middle East. Then look at Muslims whose modernizers were aggressive and mowed you down in a mosque if you didn't wear modern dress; or took women's veils off in the street and ripped them to pieces in front of them with a bayonet; tortured mullahs; abolished Sufi orders and forced them underground. This is experienced by the ordinary Muslim in the street as an assault against religion, and yet what are these modernizers supposed to do? They've got to modernize fast. They've got to secularize. Somehow we've got to see that this has been counterproductive.

What we know from the past is that when fundamentalists are attacked, whether they're Christian, Jewish, or Muslim, they become more extreme. Certainly that happened in this country at the time of the Scopes trial. The ridicule they faced at the hands of the secular press led fundamentalists to go from the left of the political spectrum to the right, where they've remained.

Dave: You compare the Industrial and now the Technological Age to the Axial Age. Underlying economic and cultural changes are essentially forcing religion to adapt.

Armstrong: Religion speaks to contemporary conditions or it dies. The difference is that in our current pivotal period of major social, technological, and economic change, which has transformed the world, our geniuses have mostly been scientific. We've had no spiritual geniuses of the stature of the Buddha or Muhammad or Jesus or Confucius or Lao Tzu or the prophets of Israel -- I won't go on. There was a galaxy of spiritual stars in the Axial Age. We don't have our own. We still rely on those original insights.

My book, I hope, will be a critique of the way we're religious today. It often seems to me that in our various religious institutions we're producing exactly the type of religion that people like the Buddha wanted to get rid of. Buddha and Isaiah and Socrates, all these people, who said, "Question everything. Never take anybody else's word for it. Never take anything on faith. If a religious belief doesn't conform, if it doesn't work for you, leave it, that's fine. Question everything, even utterly sacred truths." Like the prophets of Israel saying that God is not reflexively on the side of the Israel, as he was at the time of the Exodus.

And compassion is the key. No interest in doctrinal formulations, very little interest in the afterlife -- most of those religious leaders were just concerned with living fully. All this is very different from the way people conceive of religion today.

In the absence of religious geniuses, let's make good use of the ones we had at the time of the Axial Age and try to get back to some of those great insights that in fact chime really well with modernity.

Dave: But as you say, whatever Buddha or anyone else advocated two thousand years ago, those messages have since been co-opted. Year by year, through centuries and

centuries, the original message changes to the point where today, particularly as we encounter them through the media, who actually encounters those messages as they were intended? And how will that possibly change without a spiritual leader?

Armstrong: The trouble also with the media is that they'd probably blow someone to smithereens. They'd all have found some expos on the Buddha. I once was giving a phone-in for the Buddha book, and some woman rang up and said, "What's so great about this guy? He's just some lousy skunk who left his wife and kids." You can only say, "This is certainly a blot on his ascension."

Plus the whole business of celebrity now, which has become a kind of awful disease, can go to people's head, even with the best will in the world. We're all fragile beings. They may look giants from this distance, but they were vulnerable human beings.

Dave: You've written biographies of both the Buddha and Muhammad. How do you approach a biography when the subject lived so far back in history?

Armstrong: For Muhammad, I went straight back to the four major biographies of the Prophet, eighth century and ninth century. And these are not slim volumes; these are massive tomes that try to place all the Koranic texts in the context of the Prophet's life. They're real attempts to write history, as it were. Those were my principal sources. And scholarly tomes also about conditions in pre-Islamic Arabia.

My desire, at the time of the Rushdie crisis, was to show the Prophet as he is treated in early Muslim sources and in Muslim tradition for a Western audience that was becoming increasingly — and dangerously, I felt — hostile to Islam.

Dave: You put aside *A History of God* to write Muhammad when the fatwa against Rushdie was issued. How was the book received?

Armstrong: Most of the secular press in the UK either ignored the book or was sort of sneering at it. My publishers had been scared of publishing it because they thought I'd be joining Salman in hiding. They thought Muslims wouldn't like a Western woman writing this book, but the Muslims loved it.

I'd written it for Westerners, so I was surprised by Muslims writing in, saying, "I've given this to my children who are Westerners." And people have said to me, "It's because of this book that I can bring up my children Muslim. Because they are not like us," they've said. "We're from the pre-modern period. These kids question everything. They're not content with the kind of answers we had." People have told me that they've taken the book on the Hadj with them and cried over it.

A History of God was my big breakthrough book. Muhammad came out before that, and Muslims were the first people to see that I might be something more than a TV personality or a runaway nun. They took me seriously. And here, too, Muslim

organizations brought me over the Atlantic to come and speak. It was and has continued to be well received. Also the little book on Islam.

Dave: What do you want readers to take away from your books? Is there one thing more than others?

Armstrong: The main thing I want them to get is this idea of compassion. That's what we need now.

Dave: That everything boils down to the Golden Rule.

Armstrong: I'm convinced of it. It's in all the traditions, and it's what the world needs now more than religious certainty, more than doctrinal statements or more rules about what people can do in the bedroom and who can get married and who can be bishops or priests. All this is like fiddling while Rome burns.

All the world religions developed in violent societies like our own. All of them came from societies where civilization seemed on the point of collapsing under the weight of aggression and violence. Where old values were going out, no new ones were coming to take their place. The first impulse in many of these religions was a revulsion from violence. That's what we need now, to get back to some of that.

Dave: Anything you've been reading and enjoying lately?

Armstrong: Every year, especially before I go on one of these trips, I go through the whole of Jane Austen. She reminds me what good writing is. Otherwise, basically just pap on this tour. My brain goes into pap. I read the newspaper and just stare out the windows.