

What Religion Really Means

What Religion Really Means is the subtitle of a book by Karen Armstrong, the title of which is *The Case for God*. Armstrong's basic thesis is that the root of our problems is the way we imagine God. To imagine is to form an image and our images of God very quickly become idols. One of the Ten Commandments is *Thou shalt not make unto thyself any graven image*, and there is a very good reason for it. Any image we have is so much less than God. To worship an image is to demean God. Since we become what we worship, if we worship anything less than God, we diminish ourselves. Human beings are made in the image of God and our ultimate destiny in Heaven is to be like Him when we shall see Him as He is. It is actually very dangerous to imagine God, to form an image of Him and that is just as true of an image formed by words as it is of a statue or a picture. To put Armstrong's point very briefly. We mostly imagine God as a being. We think of him as a great being, a good being. We may think of God as an infinitely greater being than we are, but we would still be wrong. God is not a being; God is being. He is not good; God is goodness. God is not beautiful; He is beauty. He is not wise; He is wisdom. Even here I risk limiting God by attempting to describe Him in human words, to define "God". To define is to set limits. God has no limit. A definition is where meaning finishes. God is utterly different from us, not merely because He is infinitely greater and better than we are, but because He is the only independent reality and all other reality depends ultimately on God.

Let me give some examples of what is called the apophatic method. Apophatic means that we refuse to say; we cannot say. In the Bible, we read that the LORD is my light or the LORD is my rock or the LORD is my shepherd. Obviously, all these ideas are metaphors. God is not a candlestick or a torch. God is not a stone. Neither does He literally sit in a field, minding a flock of sheep. Light, rock and shepherd are metaphors which point us towards God, but they do not describe Him. Still less do they define Him.

This is obvious when you come to think about it. What is rather less obvious is that the same thing applies when we say that God is great or that He is good or that He is wise. We know what a great man is or what a good man is or what a wise man is. We can say that God is infinitely great, good and wise, but, if we are honest, we have no idea what it would mean to be infinitely great, infinitely good or infinitely wise. So our words, when we speak about God, are actually meaningless. The apophatic method is to refuse to speak of what we cannot speak, to be silent in the presence of the mystery of God.

We can be silent in the presence of the mystery of God if we are humble enough and wise enough. If we are truly silent in the presence of the mystery of God, so the great teachers teach us, we may become conscious that all these metaphors are profoundly true, that God is our Light, our Shepherd and our Rock, that He is great and good and wise at a level way beyond the possibility of human comprehension.

Human beings, however, find it very hard to resist the temptation to imagine God, to recreate Him in an image of our own devising. So, as the Bible says, instead of worshipping the One Who made us, we worship what we have made. Once we have turned God into an image of our own devising, we put ourselves in charge, not only of our religion, but also of our own

lives and of the world in which we live. This is a fatal move, because human beings are not up to the job of running either the Church or the world or even our own lives. Competence comes from God alone!

Let me give an example of two common idols which we human beings substitute for the living God. People were surprised when I recently used the word *spew* from the pulpit, quoting the Bible to the effect that the whale spewed Jonah out its mouth. A more disturbing use of the word *spew* comes in Revelation 3 vv 15&16. Jesus says to the Church at Laodicea: *I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.* Jesus threatens to expel the Laodiceans because they are lukewarm. I am not the only preacher to wonder if the present day Church in the western world can be charged with the same offence as the Laodiceans? We are, perhaps, neither cold nor hot, but lukewarm. Western Christianity in the modern age has tended to make a bland idol and to worship that idol in the place of God. A bland idol is unable to command the loyalty of its worshippers and unable to attract converts. The living God is replaced with an idol so bland that religion is irrelevant.

Let me illustrate what I mean. The western world has lost confidence in the notion that right and wrong are absolutes. We no longer think that justice is something with its own eternal existence, independent of what people believe. We are suspicious of moral claims. Tolerance is the only universal virtue we now recognise. The way people behave and ought to behave is, we believe, determined by culture. Law is not absolute, but culturally relative. So, not only do we no longer attempt to spread Christian values in the world, we no longer live by Christian values ourselves. We derive our values from the society in which we live, rather than from our faith. Faith makes no difference to the way we act.

Closely related to this lack of belief in moral absolutes is the belief that it is always wrong to be judgmental. We find it hard, therefore, to believe that God is our judge. If there is a final judgment, we imagine, God will simply let everyone off. So what people believe and what they do makes no effective difference to their chances of getting to Heaven – even if there is such a place.

Even if there are standards, there is no point in trying to live by them and no reason to feel penitent if we fail.

We have also got used to drawing a strict line between the supernatural and the natural. What is more, we assume that the supernatural is far less likely to be true than the natural. We believe that everything has a natural explanation and that supernatural interventions happen very rarely or not at all. This leaves very little reason to pray for what we need or to give thanks for what we have except that it makes us feel better when we do.

So the idol with which Western civilisation has replaced the living God does not teach us how we ought to live. Belief in Him probably makes no difference to our eternal destiny. Prayer is only useful for the psychological effect it has on the people saying their prayers.

Religion then becomes just one more institution competing for customers in a consumer society. Church is not much more than a branch of the leisure industry and, if people support the Church, they do so because it suits them, rather than from any sense of the mystery of God. Small wonder that most people regard religion as irrelevant.

The other great modern idol is the opposite of the bland. For fundamentalists and fanatics of all religions, God is the guarantor of their beliefs about the world. They don't humbly seek God's Will. They are sure that they know what God wants and it is the same as what they want. Once you've decided that you are doing the will of an omnipotent and omniscient being, it's no holds barred. People who oppose you are the enemies of God and you can be absolutely ruthless in dealing with them, indeed it is your duty to be absolutely ruthless. You might be a suicide bomber or a grand inquisitor, but you are right to stop at nothing, because you are doing the will of God. Only, of course, such a god is an idol, the invention of his so-called worshippers.

If we put aside all idols, if we adopt the apophatic way of forbearing to speak of that of which we cannot speak, if we approach God with open and humble hearts, we learn that God is love. Whatever is not of love is not of God. God breathes the breath of life into every human being. If we are truly seeking God, we will find Him in other people. There is a compassion with others, a sympathy. We cannot honestly claim to love God if we fail to love all other people made in His image. If we contemplate God with receptive minds, we shall recognise that God is in every created thing, that He made and sustains everything that is. Our attitude to everything in the whole universe is profoundly affected by our proper relationship with God.

We tend to think of faith as the opposite of reason. We speak of belief as though it were a weaker kind of knowing. A creed is something we learn and cling on to, if necessary, in the face of all opposition and evidence to the contrary. But faith is rational. Jesus is the *Λόγος*, the divine Wisdom, the divine Reason. The word "believe" originally meant to love, to prize, to hold dear. It is related to the German *liebe* (beloved) and the Latin *libido*. Creed comes from the Latin word *credo*. We render *credo*, I believe, but it comes from *cor do*, which means *I give my heart*. Belief or faith is not a weaker kind of knowing. It is certainly not in opposition to science or rationality. Belief, faith, creed is commitment to God, a loving relationship with Him, which in turn necessarily implies a loving relationship with other people and respect for the whole of creation. *Owe no man anything*, says St Paul, *but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law*. God is so utterly other that He is beyond our comprehension and the only wise course is to refrain from speaking about that of which we cannot speak, but we can know and love God through Jesus and the Spirit. The Trinity is not a mathematical puzzle, but an unfolding of the mystery of God to include us in His eternal love. Revelation 3 continues, *Behold I stand at the door and knock: if any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come into him, and sup with him, and he with me*.