

# One woman's spiritual journey

by Kate Holt

Karen Armstrong, the author of such international bestsellers as *The Battle for God, Islam: A Short History* and *A History of God: The 4,000 Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, never intended to become adept at reframing failure. But in a talk at St. Jerome's University in February, she described her spiritual journey as a succession of seeming disasters that brought her to a sure calling and a place in the world.

Armstrong's religious life officially began on September 14, 1962, when, at the age of 17, she packed her bags and—against her parents' wishes—entered a convent. As she recounted in her first book, *Through the Narrow Gate*, she left the convent seven years later, “obscurely broken and damaged.”

She continued with the studies she had begun at Oxford, realizing that her time in the convent had permitted her no knowledge of the outside world: “We didn't know who the Beatles were, had never heard of Vietnam, and knew nothing of politics.” At times she longed for death, simply because she didn't know how to live, and couldn't foresee any possible future

for herself. A committee at Oxford rejected her PhD, and, after five months of very public controversy, the decision was upheld. Armstrong then decided to try

teaching, but health problems forced her to leave her position. For many years she had struggled with an undiagnosed illness; discovering that she had epilepsy was both a relief and a setback.

While in Jerusalem working on a documentary about the life of St. Paul, Armstrong became profoundly aware of the connection between Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. When it came to light that the producers were embezzling funds, Channel 4 declared the series bankrupt and pulled out, leaving Armstrong's television career—and three solid years of work—in ruins.

For the first time in her memory, Karen Armstrong was angry. Thanks to her doctors, she was no longer neurologically impaired. The ability to have a full emotional reaction to yet another failed attempt at a career proved to be a huge step forward. On a spiritual level, she was beginning to thaw, and was coming to understand that one cannot possibly acknowledge the pain of others if one denies one's own pain. By understanding that life is suffering, Armstrong had taken her first step in returning to religion.

The second step was deciding to write a book about God, a positive look at the three faiths she observed living together in Jerusalem. In the process, Armstrong discovered that religion is actually a form of ethical alchemy—it's less about belief and more about behaving differently, about doing things that change you.

Her talk at St. Jerome's examined her most recent work, *The Spiral Staircase: My Climb Out of Darkness*. She shares her personal quest with others as a means of encouraging them to discover their own path. “The bliss of my life has proved, much to my astonishment, to be the study of theology. For other people, it will be a marriage, a career, raising children, a ministry...we have to find what is right for us and eventually it will take us to the centre of our lives.”

And what does a woman who has discovered her calling in the study of theology conclude? “The chief religious virtue is compassion,” she told those assembled in Siegfried Hall. “Egotism, hatred and dislike of others keep us from an experience of the divine.”

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Karen Armstrong, author of *The Spiral Staircase*

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