

which she later regretted having published, earned her applause from British atheists and disdain from many Catholics. In 1993 she published the first of her globally acclaimed works, *The History of God: The 4,000 Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*.

Karen Armstrong's Memoir: *The Spiral Staircase: My Climb out of Darkness* (2004)

This more neatly chronological memoir, nuanced with rich psychological insight and astonishing clarity, is achingly sad. Like Rice, Armstrong's "climb out of darkness" is a long, incremental and difficult journey. During most of this memoir, Armstrong is weighed down with mental and physical suffering and constantly absorbed by feelings of failure, futility, and self-loathing. Over and over again she confesses social alienation and lack of feeling. Worse, since childhood she had endured blackouts and seizures which the convent nuns sadly and ignorantly took to be episodes of melodrama and self-indulgence. Not until her late twenties was Armstrong finally diagnosed with epilepsy and the disease brought under control. In 1982, fired from her teaching job because of ill health-- in one of many episodic "turns upward" that she fails to recognize at the time--Karen Armstrong was hired on the cheap to write a TV documentary of the life of Saint Paul. This job changed her life forever by taking her to Israel and introducing her to the Abrahamic religions—and to the writing of the history of religions.

Two Women, Two Paths to God

These two strong, hugely successful, and complicated women take different paths toward "the light." A circle best represents Rice's decades' long quest, albeit a messy circle, scribbled by a 3-year old. At her destination, she finds transcendence in Catholicism's orthodoxy and traditions and in the fusion of memory, beauty, art, mysticism, and unquestioned faith. Rice was "called out of darkness" by a loving, forgiving God who mercifully never gave up on her. In return, Rice wholly surrenders to the will of God, as expressed through Christ. If there are errors in Catholic doctrine and practice, maintains Rice, they are not her concern, hence her "miracle of ignorance." Jesus knows all and will mend them in His own way and time.

Armstrong employs a very different symbol for her journey, the spiral staircase, inspired by T.S. Eliot's poem *Ash Wednesday*, which pervades and even structures her book. There is no "surrender" for Armstrong, no "miracle of ignorance." Quite the contrary. Armstrong finds "micro moments" of transcendence in research and writing about God, religion, and even myth. Armstrong becomes a "freelance monotheist" who finds both faith and God again in the study of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. The Trinity as a religious concept is beautiful, meaningful, and transformational, she confesses, but so also are aspects of the Judaic and Islamic God. It is to this God she is now in service and for this God she has literally become a nun again. Unlike Rice, she has never been "found." Armstrong has "climbed out of darkness" through the force of her own intellectual will—via "upward turnings" that take her farther and farther away from the orthodoxy of any single religious tradition. Her final chapter is a magnificent tribute to the power of her conversion from atheism.

A Few Final Thoughts

Rice and Armstrong provide two models of transformation: surrender and activism. Most readers will recognize that Rice's model is more traditionally Christian. Rice's confession of faith, in fact, reminds me of a beautiful song from my youth accompanying the alter calls at my small California Methodist church:

All to thee, my blessed Savior, I surrender all.

Armstrong, an "amateur theologian" and proud of it, never surrenders to orthodoxy or tradition. She respects mysticism, but experiences it only briefly and rarely; she respects faith, but filters her own faith, paradoxically, through her intellectual gifts. Her return to God comes neither by submission nor idealism, but by scholastic boldness: questioning, researching, debating, analyzing, writing.

For this reviewer, "Which path to God is best?" is not a relevant question. These authors' respective transformations have borne the very same fruit: daily lives infused with greater compassion, kindness, and tolerance of others. Renewed creative powers. Ennobled goals. Less self-centeredness. My years at Oakhurst have made it abundantly clear to me that the seekers of God among us have taken or are now taking equally diverse, mysterious, extremely personal, and difficult paths. These memoirs honor them too. In fact, even if no longer a self-described Seeker, anyone interested in the "search for God" may benefit from the souls laid bare and the "cries of the heart" infusing these books, now in our OBC library. Check them out. Read them with joy. Anne Rice and Karen Armstrong reclaim God after long, despairing spiritual journeys. They, like you, perhaps, and certainly like me, have come in from the dark.

Note: This book review is provided as a service to the OBC membership and does not necessarily reflect the views of any Library Committee member other than the writer.