So long as it lacks historical coherence, the official story will probably never be believed, and Americans will continue to ask questions based on cunningly manufactured falsehoods. To be sure, every nation is sustained by its own myths, which occasionally collide with reality. But when myths are as divorced from reality as these are, they become dangerous. Americans are encouraged to feel nostalgia for a past that never was, wax dreamily about what might have been, or indulge in elaborate paranoid fantasies about their own government. Such states of mind hardly conduce to a rational consideration of America's role in a new world.

—Max Holland, a contributing editor of the WQ and a former Wilson Center Fellow, is writing a biography of John McCloy, a member of the Warren Commission.

Other Titles

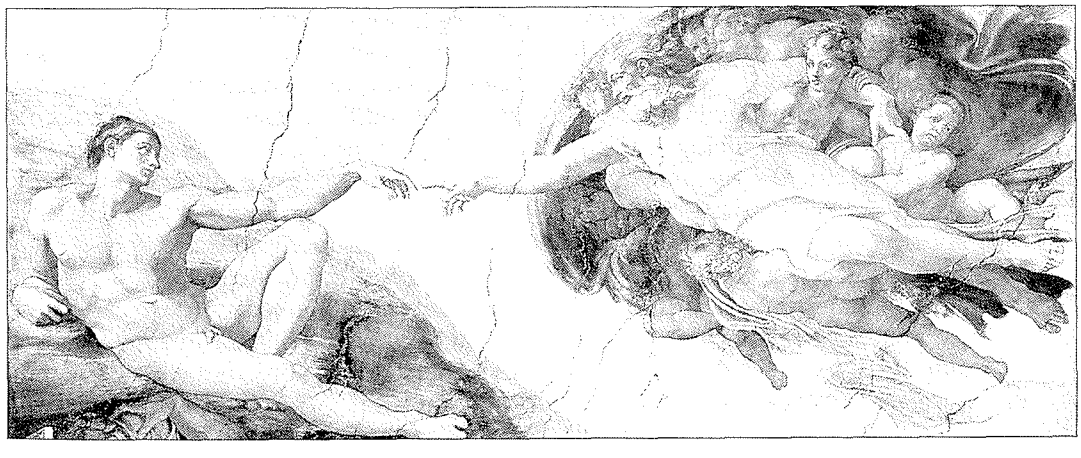
History

A HISTORY OF GOD: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. *By Karen Armstrong. Knopf. 460 pp. $27.50*

Armstrong's sweeping history of the idea of God is something of a hybrid. Parts of it read like philosophy and theology; parts might best be described as the history of human psychology. The book as a whole reflects the experiences of its author, who, she tells us, spent seven disappointing years as a Roman Catholic nun, lost her faith, left the order, and turned to the study of the history of religion. Today, she teaches at a rabbinical institute and is affiliated with the Association of Muslim Social Scientists.

Armstrong organizes her sprawling material around the simple notion that seeking God, or seeking an overarching meaning to the universe under whatever name, is just one of those things that human beings do. As many times as the monotheistic idea disappoints them or fails to accord with events, humans come back with yet another variation to bring their God into conformity with what they've learned. This process has given rise to an endless oscillation between conceptions such as the serenely impersonal God of Aristotle—unmoved mover at the top of the hierarchy of forms, existing in the state of divine and unregarding *apatheia* toward the Creation—and the personalized deity in such forms as Jesus.

Much of this is familiar, though it becomes less so once Armstrong traces the same patterns into the rationalist and mystic movements that followed the emergence of Islam. "Just as there are



only a given number of themes in love poetry," she argues, "so too people have kept saying the same things about God over and over again."

The image is of a constant systole and diastole of belief: The monotheistic vision, while exercising what appears to be an irresistible draw on the imaginations of people born with a certain "spiritual talent," is just abstract enough to be exceedingly difficult to maintain. Slippage recurs in several directions: toward idolatry, the reduction of God or God's will to some person or small part of the ideal; toward the anthropomorphism that finally makes it difficult to see the divinity as a Being of a radically different order of existence from oneself; or, the opposite danger, toward the Platonic idealism that becomes so remote that people cease to apply human standards of decency or logic to what's seen as God-inspired. As for the future, Armstrong suggests, "The anthropomorphic idea of God as Lawgiver and Ruler is not adequate to the temper of postmodernity."

Though the tone veers occasionally, as here, toward the peremptory, the author surely is entitled to a few wobbles in the course of writing 400 pages on the (by definition) inexpressible. The compendium hangs together because of her unfailing warmth of appreciation for the human phenomena she records: the steady pull toward the "particularly difficult virtue" of compassion and the continual "shock of human surprise and wonder" that anything should exist at all.

THE AGE OF FEDERALISM: The Early American Republic, 1788–1800. *By Stanley Elkins and Eric McKitrick. Oxford Univ. Press. 925 pp. $39.95*

In the annals of political catastrophe, it is hard to top the story of the Federalists. From the commanding heights of American politics after the ratification of the Constitution in 1788, the Federalists plunged to nearly complete oblivion 12 years later with the election of the Republicans' Thomas Jefferson to the presidency.

The Federalists' collapse undoubtedly owed much to their uncanny knack for the political boner. Even before the brilliant and irascible John Adams succeeded George Washington as president in 1797, the Federalists—never formally constituted as a party—fell to brawling among themselves. By 1800 the nation's two leading Federalists were openly at odds, with Adams disdaining the very idea of party and Alexander Hamilton violently slandering Adams for "vanity without bounds," among other real and imagined defects. But Elkins and McKitrick, historians at Smith College and Columbia University, respectively, argue that deeper historical forces were undermining the Federalist cause. Seeking to extend into the post-Revolutionary era the historical interpretation of the American "mentality" begun by Bernard Bailyn in *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (1967) and lately enlarged by Gordon Wood's *Radicalism of the American Revolution* (1992), they argue that changing "modes of thought and feeling" in America during these years rendered the Federalist idea unworkable.

That idea was a similar but more partisan version of the Founding Fathers' vision of a society ruled by men of "enlightened views and virtuous sentiments." It was a vision that could accommodate neither the rise of new wealth and the political interests it generated nor the arrival and integration of immigrants, especially the Irish. It left no room for the rise of political parties. It was a vision, in short, that was spectacularly unsuited to democratic politics, and especially to the clash of interests and parties in the commercial republic then aborning. (James Madison, the chief author and defender of the Constitution, thus shifted to the Republican camp.)

As the authors show, the Alien and Sedition Laws of 1798, one of the Federalists' most dramatic blunders, amounted to little more than a desperate attempt to stamp out the practice of politics. Under these laws, the Federalists in 1799 had John Fries and other rather meek German tax protesters in Pennsylvania dragged from their homes in the middle of the night and tried on charges of treason before what was virtually a kangaroo court. Fries was saved from the gallows the next year only by John Adams's pardon, which the president granted over the angry protests of his own cabinet. But the Federalists lost the once-solid support of the Germans and with it the entire state of Pennsylvania. So it went for the Federalists in case after case—in seeking an active federal government and a standing army,