

**Ruminations: Stop Karen Armstrong! (Saturday, September 12, 2009)**

**by Fleming Rutledge**

Something really has to be done about Karen Armstrong. I am too busy to do it, but I wish someone else would. She is much more an enemy of faith than is "Hitchkins" (Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins). Here she is on the front page of the Weekend Journal (a section of the Saturday/ Sunday section of the *Wall Street Journal*, September 12-13) facing off against Dawkins. Two entire pages are given over to this: MAN vs. GOD, the headline says (at least the WSJ continues to go its politically incorrect "exclusive-language" way). The huge illustration shows Michelangelo's God over against Darwin (oh, no, not *again...*). What has happened to the WSJ? is this Rupert Murdoch at work? the WSJ editorials are hyper-right-wing and not to my taste, but for a long time the paper has been, in certain respects, a friend to the apostolic faith. What has happened?

Dawkins, like Freud, is less a threat to biblical faith than Armstrong, who like Jung embraces a generic, spiritualized, anthropocentric approach to God (exactly what Freud identified in *The Future of an Illusion*). Dawkins is quite right in ending his article the following way (I am condensing):

The modern theologian is scornful of scientific arguments for God's existence [rightly so--this was always off-track]. We are not so naive as to be hung up on God's actual *existence*. [Here Dawkins accurately nails a lot of today's "liberal" theology.] "It doesn't matter," Dawkins' theological liberal continues, "whether God exists in a scientific sense. What matters is whether he exists for you or for me."

Dawkins then continues, speaking in his own voice, "If that's what paddles your canoe, you'll be paddling up a very lonely creek. The mainstream belief of the world's peoples is very clear. They believe in God...in objective reality...Tell the congregation of a church or mosque that 'existence' is too vulgar a concept to fasten onto their God, and they will brand you an atheist. They'll be right."

Karl Barth, of whom Karen Armstrong is blissfully ignorant, said that he found atheists to be more bracing conversation partners than "religious" people. Certainly we can welcome this last observation of Dawkins, although the rest of his article shows his usual, annoying refusal to see that many serious Christians (Pope John Paul II was a notable example) hold Darwin and orthodox Christian faith simultaneously.

Karen Armstrong and others like her are "religious" without a clue as to the Subject of *theology*. If she really understands the Church Fathers at any level, one seeks evidence in vain. If she has ever heard of the Reformation she does not indicate it. If she has ever had any serious dialogue with any major Protestant theologian her writing does not show it. If she has ever heard of the doctrine of revelation she shows no sign of it. She is a walking, talking, writing exhibit for Freud's basic thesis: God is what we have made up out of our own wishes and needs.

Who can mount a powerful defense against this sort of thing? Marilynne Robinson, for one, knows better--but her voice is soft. We need thunder and lightning.

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**About The Reverend Fleming Rutledge**

Fleming Rutledge, having spent twenty-two years in parish ministry, now has an international preaching vocation. Her three sermon collections, *The Bible and The New York Times*, *Help My Unbelief*, and *The Undoing of Death* (Eerdmans) have met with wide acclaim across denominational lines. Her most recent book is *Not Ashamed of the Gospel: Sermons from Romans*. She is

also author of *The Battle for Middle-earth: Tolkien's Divine Design in The Lord of the Rings and The Seven Last Words*. She has received a grant from the Louisville Institute to complete a book-length treatment of the meaning of the Crucifixion for today's world. Mrs. Rutledge served as interim rector of St. John's, Salisbury, Connecticut (1996-7), and has twice been a resident Fellow at the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton. During the 2008 fall term, she was resident at Wycliffe College in the University of Toronto, as a teacher of preaching.

Mrs. Rutledge is widely recognized in the United States, in Canada, and in the UK not only as a preacher and lecturer, but also as one who teaches other preachers. Her particular expertise is the intersection of Biblical theology with contemporary culture, current events and politics, literature, music and art. She is invited to preach regularly in prominent pulpits such as the Duke University Chapel, Trinity Church in Boston, the National Cathedral, and the Harvard Memorial Chapel.

Ordained to the diaconate in 1975, Mrs. Rutledge was one of the first women to be ordained to the priesthood of the Episcopal Church (January 1977). She matriculated at General Theological Seminary and received her Master of Divinity degree from Union Theological Seminary in New York in 1975.

For fourteen years Mrs. Rutledge was assistant and then Senior Associate at Grace Church in New York City, a parish celebrated at that time for its youthful congregation and evangelistic preaching. She was actively involved in the renewal there. Her previous position was at Christ's Church, Rye, New York, where she was known for her creation and leadership of an extensive Christian program for high-school youth.

A native of Franklin, Virginia, Mrs. Rutledge graduated from Sweet Briar College in 1959, *magna cum laude* with highest honors in English. She was elected to Phi Beta Kappa. She was awarded an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree from Virginia Theological Seminary in May 1999.

Fleming and her husband, Reginald E. (Dick) Rutledge, celebrate their 50th anniversary in 2009. They have two grown daughters and two grandchildren.