

[HARDCOVER: UK]

Religion, stuck between a rock and a hard place

BY ALAIN DE BOTTON
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

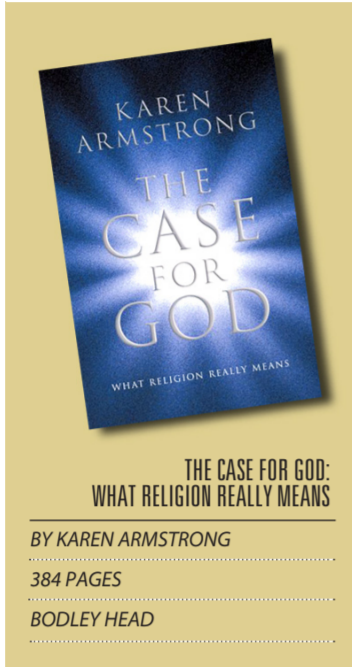
Karen Armstrong is one of the handful of wise and supremely intelligent commentators on religion who has become distressed by the tone of recent discussions of the subject. Her targets are religious fundamentalism on the one hand and militant atheism on the other: in other words, al-Qaeda as well as Richard Dawkins. In plain language, and nowhere more eloquently than in this new book, Armstrong accuses both factions of misunderstanding the nature of God and, interestingly, of doing so in similar ways.

Both atheists and fundamentalists take God to be an essentially human sort of figure, a giant Father in the sky who watches over us, punishes the guilty, intervenes directly in our affairs and is entirely comprehensible to our minds. Fundamentalists commit, in Armstrong's view, the grave error of presuming to know God's mind and also of enlisting God on their side against their enemies. Unsurprisingly, militant atheists observe this reductive vision of God and in turn slam religion as a child-like description of the world that cannot compare with the subtlety and practical powers of science.

Armstrong's new book is shaped as a response to these two distortions. She wishes to remind us of the mystery of God. Her sympathy is with the great Jewish, Christian and Muslim theologians who have denied that any human attempt to put the divine into words will be accurate. We are simply too limited to be able to know God; our apprehension must hence be suffused with an awareness of our provisional and potentially faulty natures. She writes: "He is not good, divine, powerful or intelligent in any way that we can understand. We could not even say that God 'exists,' because our concept of existence is too limited."

Much of Armstrong's book is spent pointing out the deep-seated needs that religions have traditionally addressed. She begins in the caverns of Lascaux in the Dordogne and argues that the early religious rites to which the famous animal pictures belonged were connected with our ancestors' wish to atone for the overbearing guilt that came from having to butcher other living creatures for survival. Like art, religion has been a way of containing feelings that might otherwise tear individuals and societies apart. Armstrong leans heavily on the distinction first made by the ancient Greeks between the realms of mythos and logos. Logos is "a pragmatic mode of thought that enables people to function effectively in the world;" it is what we rely on when organizing society or planning a journey. However, logos has its limitations: "It cannot assuage human grief

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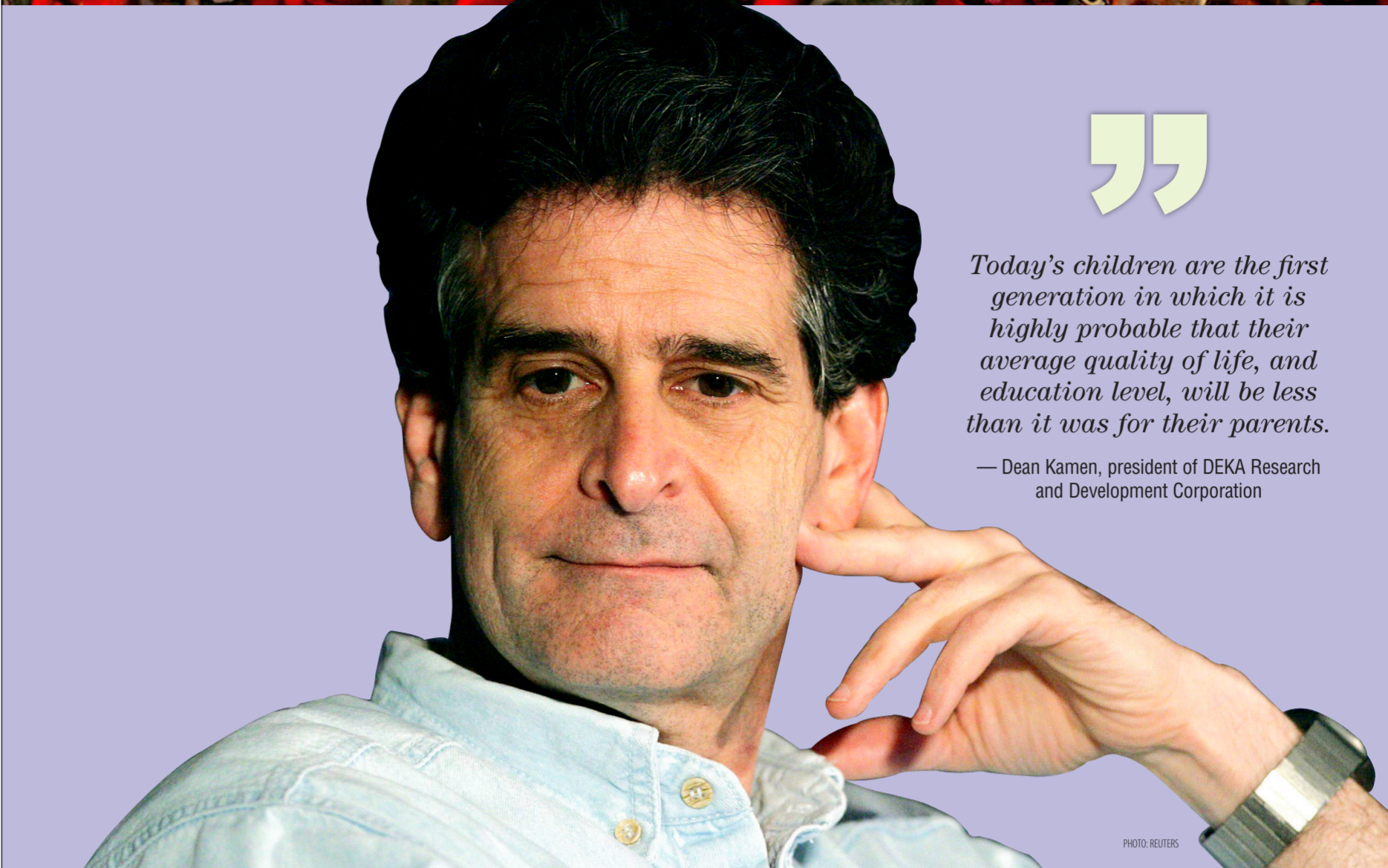
or find ultimate meaning in life's struggles." For this, there is the realm of mythos or myth, to which religion and art belong. Religion offers us moments of what Armstrong calls, using another Greek term, *ekstasis*, a stepping outside of the norm for the sake of release and consolation.

Aside from helping us to deal with our feelings of fear, aggression and guilt, religion is also defended by Armstrong as a source of compassion. She recounts the story of a man who once came to see the great Rabbi Hillel and asked if he might undertake a rigorous course of study of the Torah with him. Hillel waved him away: "What is hateful to yourself, do not to your fellow man. That is the whole of the Torah and the remainder is but commentary. Go learn it." Armstrong traces the emphasis on compassion across the major religions. There are fascinating discussions here of the Buddhist state of "anatta," or no self, a desirable condition that can be reached only through extensive meditation. It can lead us, for brief periods, to look at the world as though we were not ourselves participants in it, and therefore free us from our noxious impulses to pass judgment and to presume that we know why other people have acted the way they have.

The concluding part of Armstrong's book traces the growth of modern atheism and attributes it largely to religions' failure to argue for what is most compelling about them. Fatally, religions tried to defend themselves against science by arguing that they knew the truth better than the geologists, rather than presenting themselves (as one feels Armstrong would have wished) as the guardians of mystery and therapeutic maneuvers of the mind.



SUNDAY PROFILE



Today's children are the first generation in which it is highly probable that their average quality of life, and education level, will be less than it was for their parents.

— Dean Kamen, president of DEKA Research and Development Corporation

Segway savior

He's made wheelchairs climb stairs and turned cow dung into kilowatts, but can Dean Kamen re-engineer the world?

BY MARK HARRIS
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

When a world famous, multimillionaire engineer who holds 440 patents and owns two jets, two helicopters and a private island tells you to worry, it's probably time to worry. And Dean Kamen is a very worried man.

Quoting HG Wells, he tells me: "I think the world is in a race between catastrophe and education." We're in the corner office of his hi-tech research company, DEKA, surrounded by Einstein memorabilia and cartoons of his most famous invention, the Segway electric scooter. "In most cases, catastrophe is winning."

"The polar ice caps, swine flu, energy, the environment: almost every problem I can think of that's going to bite us in the ass in the years to come needs extraordinary technical achievements," says the man whose own achievements include a robotic prosthetic arm and a wheelchair that can climb stairs. "More than ever, the world needs good engineers. However, the pool of talent is shrinking not growing."

That's not all. According to Kamen: "Today's children are the first generation in which it is highly probable that their average quality of life, and education level, will be less than it was for their parents." This is not the Dean Kamen I came to see. I came to see the visionary technologist who dropped out of college to develop the world's first mobile insulin pump, the proud inventor who envisaged millions of Segways seething through the world's cities, the iconoclast engineer who, disappointed with teenagers idolizing sports stars, created his own sport based on competitive robotics. (Don't laugh: the FIRST championship attracts nearly 17,000 school teams from around the world.)

Instead, I got a man whose passion for technology seems increasingly swamped by frustrations with global realpolitik. Take his work on water and power systems for developing nations.

"50 percent of all human diseases are due to water-borne pathogens," says Kamen. "For the few billion people that are sick and dying on a daily basis, the idea that we're going to build them a municipal water infrastructure in the next year, or even the next decade, is profoundly naive. So we set out to develop technologies that can solve the problem of giving people clean water without needing to transform their environment."

Cue DEKA's integrated water purifier, codenamed Slingshot. "Here's a box with two hoses," says Kamen. "Dip one in anything that looks wet — an ocean full of salt, a well full of arsenic, a pond full of cryptosporidium, giardia and fecal matter — and out of the other one comes pure drinking water. It's portable so it can be carried into a village, and it's cheap [US\$1,500] and productive enough so that you can make enough water to share the cost over a few hundred people."

Kamen doesn't pretend Slingshot is home to any ground-breaking discoveries: "We didn't invent vapor compression. We didn't invent the distillation process. We didn't invent any fundamental understanding of the Second Law of Thermodynamics. But we did make a lot of little inventions to make a small scale, highly reliable device that frees us from having to measure what's wrong with the input water. There's a lot of technology in there that we're quite proud of."

He's just as proud of his Stirling engine (a device to convert heat into mechanical energy, first conceived of in 1816), which

produces up to 1kW of electricity from virtually any fuel source. "In a trial in Bangladesh, they put cow dung into our machine. It was a multiple win: small, distributed, scalable and using fuel that is otherwise toxic. Whether you burn it or not, cow dung evolves methane, which is 21 times worse than carbon dioxide as a greenhouse gas. So why not capture it and turn it into useful heat and electricity?" Working together, the two devices could boost living standards and save lives across the world. Instead, the prototypes are languishing in DEKA's labs. "In order to put them in volume production, you need a well-defined market and a distribution strategy," explains Kamen. "The problem is that most of our commercial partners — even the giants — do not do a lot of business in the underdeveloped parts of the world. This is not a shortage of technology. It's a shortage of courage, vision, awareness: a lot of human things."

It's this lack of long-term thinking that infuriates Kamen. "Our technology is being squandered on quick buck applications. More and more we seem to be defaulting to the short term. Do we need to double again the rate at which we move data so two kids can play games with even more realistic violence? Or should we be ensuring everyone has at least some access to the Internet? The world doesn't need the next generation of videogames."

It might not need them but it seems to want them, which is arguably the opposite of what happened with Kamen's ill-fated Segway Transporter. Kamen thought that

his nippy, balancing scooter would "be the car what the car was to the horse and buggy." He whipped up a media frenzy before its launch in 2001 and invested heavily in factories capable of producing 40,000 units a month. Eight years later, sales of Segway have only just passed the 50,000 mark.

In April, Segway and the bankrupt US carmaker General Motors unveiled a two-man, semi-enclosed update called PUMA (Personal Urban Mobility and Accessibility) with a top speed of 56kph and a range of up to 35km. This time around, Kamen is almost dismissive of the new vehicle: "The day we made the first Segway, the very first one, we drew pictures of enclosed ones. Going back and tweaking things to make them 5 percent better or 3 percent cheaper? There are whole industries who know how to do that very well. Our position is been there, done that, did it, changed the world, move on."

Talking of moving on, Kamen is now wary of hyping — or even mentioning — his future projects, but he does let one slip. "At DEKA, we're looking at a couple of ways to be in the energy business. We're working on solar now and I think the world of energy is going to see a lot of changes soon."

When pressed for more details, Kamen clams up, or rather changes the subject to North Dumpling, his 0.03-hectare private island off the coast of New York, which he refers to in deadpan as an independent kingdom. "Dumpling is completely carbon neutral," he says. "We have solar panels on every building, a 10kW wind turbine, our own little Stirling engine for backup power, burning only local fuel. We're making our own water out of the ocean with Slingshot. And we are now developing a foreign aid program to help the US."

A man who wants to re-engineer the whole world for sustainability, one country at a time? At last, here's the Dean Kamen I came to see.

[HARDCOVER: US]

The myth of the Sino-Russian strategic alliance

The growing relationship between the Bear and the Dragon does not threaten the West. It is rife with contradictions and at best tactical, author Bobo Lo argues

BY J. MICHAEL COLE
STAFF REPORTER

The history of Sino-Russian relations is a long and tortuous one between neighbors that eyed each other with suspicion. To this day, the Russian psyche continues to be affected by memories of the Mongol invasion and fear of the "yellow peril," with images of "barbarian" hordes pouring over the border seared in people's consciousness. For Chinese, Russia was for a brief period a modernizer and ally, but also a threat, as during the border clashes in 1969, which came close to sparking nuclear war. On one side, Russia sees itself as a great power, one which draws ideologically mostly from Western civilization; on the other, China is rising, but its identity is firmly rooted in the Asian tradition and its focus is on domestic development and regional stability.

The long history of mistrust and ideological differences makes Russia and China the least likely of allies. But since the end of the Cold War, the two countries have grown closer and managed to settle, if only temporarily, a number of territorial

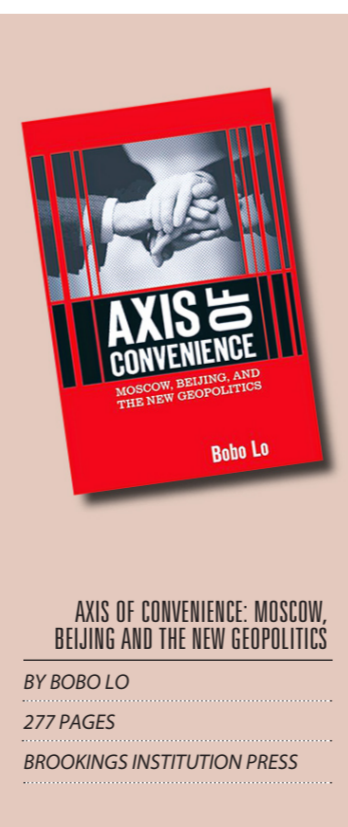
disputes such as the contentious Russian Far East. Cooperation has increased dramatically in such fields as military procurement and natural resources, while Moscow and Beijing have helped create regional security bodies — such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization — to facilitate coordination and "democratize" international relations.

This is not to say that the process of rapprochement was not without friction. As Bobo Lo, director of the Russia and China programs at the Center for European Reform, argues in *Axis of Convenience*, the road to convergence was marred by a combination of different expectations, underlying xenophobia and changing global circumstances. Rather than progress smoothly, relations between Moscow and China suffered many setbacks, such as when, in the wake of 9/11, Russian President Vladimir Putin allowed the US to deploy troops in Central Asia without first informing Beijing.

Lo, whose thesis rests on the assumption that international

relations are becoming more, rather than less, chaotic, argues that despite the extraordinary achievements in Sino-Russian rapprochement in the past two decades or so, the notion of a "strategic alliance" is pure fantasy. The idea of strategic convergence, of a shared long-term view of the world, Lo writes, requires suspension of disbelief on Russia and China's part, mostly because both countries are looking for different things. Tellingly, despite the closer ties, both have external reference points that give precedence to relations with the US, Europe and to a smaller extent Japan. In other words, if circumstances forced either to choose between good relations with the West or their commitment to the Sino-Russian alliance, both would conceivably choose the former. It is already clear that if China were to attack Taiwan, Russia would be unlikely to jeopardize its relations with the West for China's sake. Similarly, Beijing has been wary of Moscow's adventurism and has kept a safe distance lest support for Russia

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when its behavior creates instability undermine the image of "peaceful rise" China has been cultivating.

Still, despite the divergences and contradictions, Moscow and Beijing have made grandiose proclamations of friendship and have tended to overemphasize the importance of their alliance. This, in part, has been aimed at the US, whose presence in the Asia-Pacific region and Central Asia is unwelcome by both. Notwithstanding the shared goal of undermining US influence in the region, their strategy has given rise to a triangular relationship in which Russia and China threaten each other — and the West — to go to the "other side" if they do not obtain favorable terms on a number of political matters. Russia, which sees itself as an "energy superpower," has often played that card on oil and natural gas, threatening to "go East" and cut the flow of energy to Europe. As Lo points out, however, these threats have been more successful in putting Russia's reliability into question than obtaining concessions from the EU or NATO. What will likely have the

greatest impact on the future of Sino-Russian relationship however, is the growing power imbalance between the two countries. Russia is a mere shadow of its former self, and despite its claim to great power status, it is no longer able to dictate outside its immediate neighborhood. It is increasingly ignored by the international community and would be more so if weren't for its natural resources and nuclear arsenal. China's economic development, meanwhile, has turned it into first a regional, and now global, center of gravity. Its military, while still no match for Russia's, has undergone rapid modernization, thanks in part to Russian arms sales. Moscow, therefore, realizes that an increasingly assertive China risks pushing it further to the periphery, and some sectors of the political establishment are using those fears to score points or stoke nationalist sentiment. One question that is often raised is whether after China completes unification with Taiwan the Russian Far East could be next. Another outlet for Russian fears is the new Great Game that is developing in Central Asia, in

which Russia and China are vying to become first among equals.

Increasingly, the once subservient and underdeveloped Chinese are treating Russia as little more than a source of energy. Realistic about the reliability of Russia, however, China has wisely diversified its sources, which means it would have many alternatives to choose from if relations soured again.

What emerges from Lo's useful book is a portrait of a relationship that is far more tactical and predicated on immediate needs than one that is based on and a shared view of what the world should be, which means that changing circumstances on the international scene will severely test its durability. With that, we can expect strategic tension, and perhaps occasional clashes, to characterize Sino-Russian relations for years to come, a scenario that Lo sees as the likeliest.

While not denying the substantial achievements that have been made in recent years, Lo convincingly argues that there is less to the Sino-Russian "strategic partnership" than meets the eye.