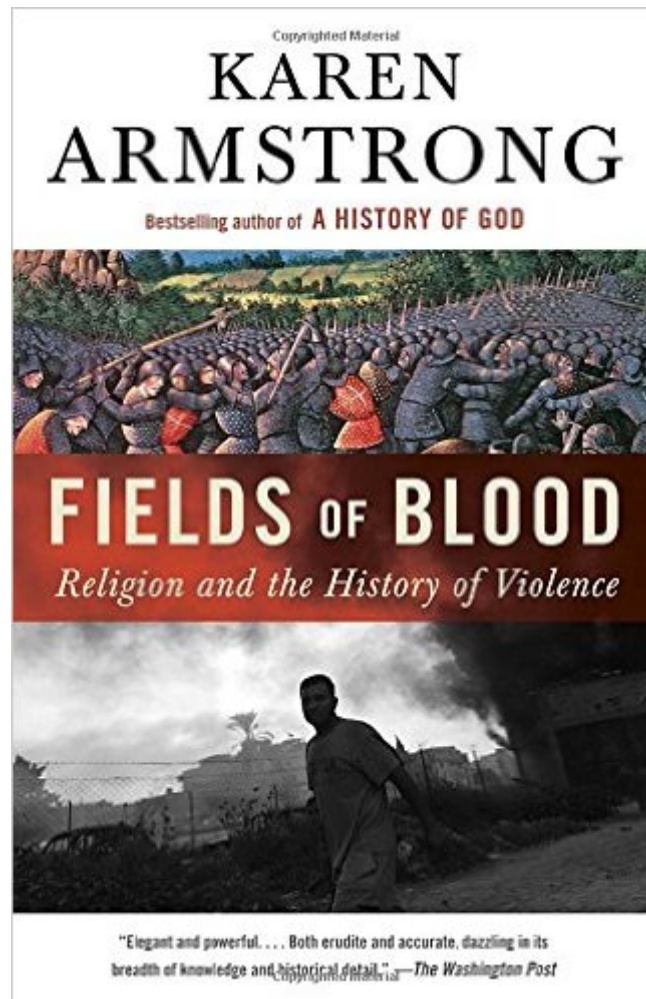


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Fields Of Blood: Religion And The History Of Violence



Synopsis

With a new postscript In these times of rising geopolitical chaos, the need for mutual understanding between cultures has never been more urgent. Religious differences are seen as fuel for violence and warfare. In these pages, one of our greatest writers on religion, Karen Armstrong, amasses a sweeping history of humankind to explore the perceived connection between war and the world's great creeds and to issue a passionate defense of the peaceful nature of faith. With unprecedented scope, Armstrong looks at the whole history of each tradition—not only Christianity and Islam, but also Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Daoism, and Judaism. Religions, in their earliest days, endowed every aspect of life with meaning, and warfare became bound up with observances of the sacred. Modernity has ushered in an epoch of spectacular violence, although, as Armstrong shows, little of it can be ascribed directly to religion. Nevertheless, she shows us how and in what measure religions came to absorb modern belligerence and what hope there might be for peace among believers of different faiths in our time.

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Customer Reviews

This is perhaps one of the most ambitious books I've ever read, and perhaps one of the most timely. As terrorists set about beheading hostages in Syria and Iraq in the name of Islam, Karen Armstrong has published an exhaustive analysis that sets out to get us to accept the proposition that it may not be religious doctrine alone that is responsible for violence. In other words, enough of the lazy thinking. Not that Armstrong herself would ever be rude enough to use a phrase like that. On the contrary, she simply lays out her theory, and lets the evidence do the talking. She clearly recognizes

the strong opinions that people today have on her chosen topic, which is precisely why she has focused on it. She equally clearly believes that their exhausted clichés simply aren't up to the task of describing the far more complicated reality. Indeed, religious violence, she states flatly, may have less to do with religion than with politics and social order. To make her case, Armstrong goes all the way back to the Sumerians, and the rise of agrarian societies that produced a surplus: a surplus that was purloined by the elite, who kept the vast community of peasants at subsistence level and kept them in line with their religious order. Indeed, in Armstrong's analysis, from the earliest days until the Enlightenment and the modern era, the sacred was tied intimately to political authority and political legitimacy. And it was balanced. If violence was religious (the Inquisition; the crusades) so, too, were thoughtful leaders advocating peace and harmony (the Buddha, the Jains, on down to St. Francis and even Salah-ad-Din, who allowed Christians to leave Jerusalem unharmed at the height of the crusades.) After all, the Bible inspired both holy warriors like the inquisitors, and the Quakers, who refuse to bear arms. That being so, how does one discuss "religion" and "violence" in the same breath, intellectually speaking? Armstrong forces the reader to reconsider what we mean when we glibly use the phrase "religious violence": we may think it's the inter-communal battles waged by Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs in India, or between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, and indeed, that's the most obvious meaning. But her broader and more important point -- and one that I hope isn't lost in the fuss that will undoubtedly ensue as people skim the book and fail to read it in the depth it demands, or look for evidence that supports their existing theories -- is a far more subtle one. She is making an argument about the link between the way a state or society views religion as a tool to oppress and to assert dominance, especially when that society (or its elites) or state feels under threat. That, she argues, has been true from ancient Mesopotamia until the Ottoman Empire. Armenians had lived relatively peaceably within its borders for centuries; it wasn't until the Sublime Porte had become the "sick man of Europe" in 1915 that the first genocide to be so labeled began in the name of defending the Ottoman Empire by eradicating Armenian Christians and seeking to establish a more "pure" Muslim Turkish society. Within each of the major religions, she argues, there is a tug of war between these pacifist tendencies and violence, and it may be politics rather than doctrine that determines which surfaces at any given point. The book covers a tremendous amount of ground -- perhaps too much, starting with the Sumerians, and moving on to the modern era and the way in which the absence of "religion" hasn't resulted in the death of violence. It's sprawling and sometimes feels slightly breathless in tone, as if Armstrong were building an argument and keeps running back to tell us "oh, and one more thing!" It doesn't help that the first few chapters -- devoted to the earliest settled and documented civilizations, in Mesopotamia, China

and India -- are not her primary area of scholarly expertise and end up sounding far more dry and remote. In its own way, it's an act of faith to get through them, although it's definitely worth the effort. As, I think, it will prove worthwhile for me to settle down and re-read large swathes of this slowly, supplementing it with other material. Armstrong clearly has a point of view and, although she doesn't sound like a polemicist, she equally clearly wants the reader to think about her arguments. In some ways, that would be better served by a shorter and more streamlined book, one that confines itself to a single religious tradition as an exemplar of the whole. But in that case, what was gained in coherence and accessibility would be forfeit in scholarly authority, so perhaps there's nothing to be done but accept her decisions and live with them. So, is religious violence actually religious at all? Armstrong's great service is that she forces us those of us tempted to use that as a starting point in any debate to question our basic assumptions and ask that question at all. That she tries to answer it herself is deeply impressive and that she does such a coherent job of it is almost awe-inspiring. That doesn't mean that this is a book for everyone. If you're a die-hard believer (and I use the word advisedly) in the likes of Sam Harris, who doesn't think that this question about religious violence should even be posed because the answer is so self-evident, then odds are this will drive you slightly crazy. Then, too, if you're looking for fingers pointing solely at SOME religious traditions, you'll be disappointed. Still, even if we're willing to rethink our preconceptions, delving into a dense, sprawling and perhaps overly-ambitious book to do so may be another matter altogether. I found it fascinating and worthwhile, but think you do need to be prepared to devote the time to this book and to approach it with an open and a curious mind. Armstrong is not assuming a scholarly level of theological knowledge among her readers. Nonetheless, you still need to commit yourself to reading every chapter, as the narrative unfolds, to follow the logic of her argument, over centuries and over several continents. It's a demanding read -- but then, given the subject matter and its importance, shouldn't it be? If you feel like tackling the task, you'll feel exhausted at the end of it, but whether you end up agreeing or disagreeing with her thesis. But I have a hard time imagining that you'd feel anything but more thoughtful and better informed.

Karen Armstrong's new book offers a dense but readable overview of the relationship between religion and violence. Although she only cites one of them by name, and that only briefly, Armstrong is plainly responding to the spate of books and articles by New Atheists arguing that religion causes much of the world's violence. Her counter-argument is that, while religion has often played a role in mass violence, other political and social factors are also relevant, and that the role of religion in public life has often been to reduce violence as well as to increase it. Her survey focuses heavily on

the history of the three Abrahamic faiths, though ancient Indian and Chinese traditions are also discussed in the opening chapters. Broadly speaking, Armstrong's argument is convincing. It helps that she is less reductive and dogmatic than those to whom she is replying, allowing for the unpleasant side of religious history without allowing it to warp her presentation. That's not to say she's perfectly even-handed or always persuasive, though. The early chapters deal with periods for which hard evidence is scant to non-existent, so some degree of reconstruction is required, opening up the possibility that Armstrong is unconsciously interpreting the evidence in a way that fits her theory. (Her model of ancient Israelite and Jewish history, for example, involves a peaceful, communal tradition in which the only violent and authoritarian impulses come from the Priestly redactors. Possible, I suppose, but not especially likely.) One also wonders why Armstrong has chosen the traditions she has, and not brought in the indigenous religions of Africa, North and South America, etc. But of course no book can do everything, and the scope of this one is already considerable. When it comes to the modern era, Armstrong is sometimes visibly straining to emphasize the non-religious aspects of a particular act of violence, or to downplay the unpleasantness of certain violent religious movements. It's one thing to avoid caricaturing complex movements, and another to produce a counter-caricature that's as distorted as the popular image. By contrast Armstrong shows little concern about caricaturing secular regimes, which she declares have a problem integrating ethnic and racial minorities. Obviously that's been true in many cases, but it's just the kind of over-generalization Armstrong would tear into if it were made about religion. But if Armstrong occasionally goes too far in countering the fierce arguments of religion's detractors, the book is in general a sophisticated and scholarly contribution to a discourse that has been too much defined by polemicists of various stripes. *Fields of Blood* is not casual reading for those who only want confirmation of what they already believed, but if you're looking for something in-depth but still accessible, it's just right.

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