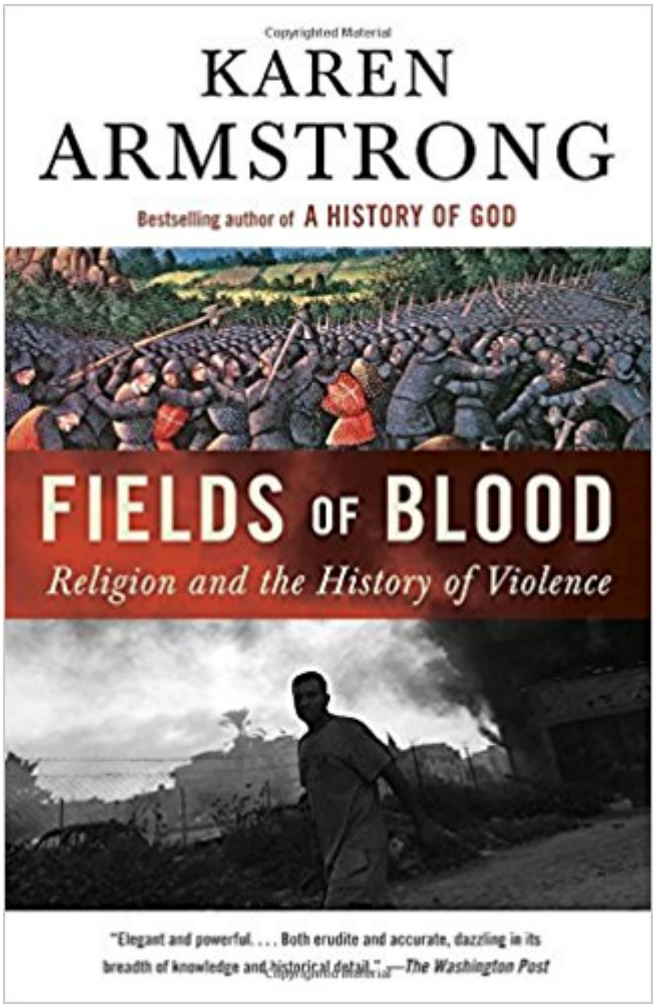
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Fields Of Blood: Religion And The History Of Violence



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Synopsis

With a new postscriptIn 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 worldÃ¢â ¬â„¢s great creedsÃ¢â ¬â •and to issue a passionate defense of the peaceful nature of faith. Ã Â Ã Â Ã Â Ã Â Ã Â With unprecedented scope, Armstrong looks at the whole history of each traditionÃ¢â ¬â •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 belligerenceÃ¢â ¬â •and what hope there might be for peace among believers of different faiths in our time.

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Customer Reviews

An Best Book of the Month, November 2014: Does religion lead to violence? This is the question that Karen Armstrong, the erudite former nun, asks in Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence. Her answer is Ã¢â ¬Å“noÃ¢â ¬Â•Ã¢â ¬â •or more specifically, that religion is not itself a source of violence and the problem lies more deeply in Ã¢â ¬Å“our human nature and the nature of

the state.Ã¢â ¬Â• To prove her point, she covers roughly five thousand years of religious history, from Gilgamesh to the present day. Along the way, she builds the case against those who state, often without much context, that Ã¢â ¬Å“religion has been the cause of all the major wars in history.Ã¢â ¬Â• This is both an apologia and a wide-ranging and very readable lesson in the history of religion. It may not completely change the mind of everyone who reads it; but like everything Armstrong writes, it will leave them more enriched. Ã¢â ¬â œChris Schluep --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Ã¢â ¬Å“Elegant and powerful. . . . Both erudite and accurate, dazzling in its breadth of knowledge and historical detail.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â •The Washington PostÃ¢â ¬Å“Consistently surprising and illuminating, Fields of Blood should be read by anyone interested in understanding the interaction of religion with violence in the modern world.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â •The New RepublicÃ¢â ¬Å“Convincing. . . . Careful, fair and true.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â •The New York Times Book Review Ã Â Ã¢â ¬Å“Makes a powerful case. . . . The argument is what matters, and hers is strong enough to change minds.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â •The Christian Science MonitorÃ¢â ¬Å“A compelling examination of the true forces underlying religious violence.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â •The Huffington Post Ã¢â ¬Å“Written in a lucid and fleet prose. . . . [Armstrong is] one of the keenest minds working on understanding the role religion plays in cultures around the globe.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â •Minneapolis Star Tribune Ã¢â ¬Å“Panoramic work. . . . Enjoyable and informative.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â •Salon Ã¢â ¬Å“A valuable, readable rebuttal of a pernicious contemporary myth. . . . Armstrong goes through the centuries and assorted cultures to demonstrate again and again how religious principles and religious leaders were co-opted to support warfare.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â •St. Louis Post-Dispatch Ã¢â ¬Å“A tour-de-force of the history of the worldÃ¢â ¬â„¢s major religions. . . . Fields of Blood is thought-provoking as it examines one of the more fascinating elements of human civilization.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â •Pittsburgh Post-Gazette Ã¢â ¬Å“Armstrong is doing us a great service. . . . We feel we are in the hands of an expert.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â •The Guardian (London) Ã¢â ¬Å“Riveting . . . [A] mighty offering . . . Armstrong is one of our most erudite expositors of religion.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â •The Observer (London) Ã¢â ¬Å“Provocative and supremely readable. . . . Bracing as ever, [Armstrong] sweeps through religious history around the globe and over 4,000 years to explain the yoking of religion and violence and to elucidate the ways in which religion has also been used to counter violence.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â •Publishers WeeklyÃ Â (starred review) Ã¢â ¬Å“Epic in scale . . . A comprehensive and erudite study of the history of violence in relation to religion . . . An intriguing read, useful resource and definitive voice in defense of the divine in human

culture.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â •Kirkus ReviewsÃ Â (starred review) Ã¢â ¬Å“A well-written historical summary of what have traditionally been viewed as Ã¢â ¬Ëœreligious Ã¢â ¬â„¢ wars, showing convincingly that in pretty much all cases it was not so much religion as it was political issues that fueled the conflict.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â •Library JournalÃ Â (starred review) Ã¢â ¬Å“Armstrong again impresses with the breadth of her knowledge and the skill with which she conveys it to us.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â •BooklistÃ Â (starred review)

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 a 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 cliches 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 legitimately. 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.

Armstrong writes a sweeping historical analysis of the role of violence in political (nation) groups and the role religious influences and people played in that process. She goes back thousands of years and traces it to the current violence associated with Muslim groups to show that most of the time religious leaders get co-opted into supporting and even promoting violence by powerful political leaders, or in the case of some Muslims, deep injustices created by other powerful groups. At other times, she shows how religious leaders resisted both the political establishment’s default to violence, but also other religious groups promoting violence.Because she picked thousands of years to review, the book is long and each period is reviewed with missing component. The pure historians may be frustrated. Sociologists would want to have more data about these trends, such that, as another review noted, it raises doubt about if she thinks we are getting worse because of nation-states or better with curbing violence.I felt she failed to show examples where religion may have been the instigator of violence and not just a co-opted participant. I agree that nation-states do have a natural national preservation mentality that motivates weapon stockpiling and aggressive dominance. The United States has become one of those aggressive countries. However, religious groups can also have their own potential "subtle" desire to control and create "religious states" where the religion sentiment drives and is driven by the national so that the violence of state and religion are the same. I think she could been more effective at showing the religious sentiments driving violence, especially among abortion clinic bombers and ISIS supporters.Despite these drawbacks, this is still a book worth reading and discussing with others.

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