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Book Review

Fields of Blood

Karen Armstrong

Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014

“How can I be religious? Religions have been the cause of war and violence in our world?” It is a statement which I often hear among people who have rejected faith traditions and wish to remain secular or atheist/agnostic. *My response is: “Was it the religious leaders or the political, economic or ethnic leaders that produced war and violence?”*

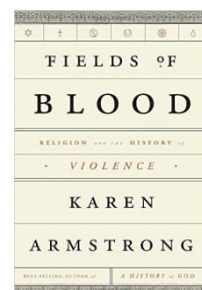
Now, people can read Karen Armstrong’s *Fields of Blood*, a readable, historical study of “religion and the history of violence.” Her focus is the Abrahamic Faiths: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, but she also studies Greek, Roman, and some early Middle Eastern civilizations which survived and kept power by increasing their lands and the number of people they were ruling. If a tribe or people were not growing, it would be seen as weak and other leaders would attack them to gain power, status, and wealth. It was a violent world.

Armstrong’s contention is that religious leaders have been complicit with the kings, emperors, and generals, but that they also put limits on the victor’s violence and the destruction from military ventures. Faith leaders asked questions about treating enemies humanely, reducing killing, stopping the looting, and differentiating between soldiers and civilians. Faith groups were concerned about hunger, health, homelessness, education and other essential needs of people and communities.

Today we distinguish between political, economic, ethnic, social, and religious silos. But civilizations before the Enlightenment had no “silos.” Society had expectations for everyone and people lived in their roles. One’s faith was connected to one’s ethnicity. A man was obedient to the group and to their leaders — most people functioned out of the tribal ethos. The king or emperor was ruler of church and state as well as leader of the soldiers. Religious leaders were part of the whole. Since the 19th century, there has been more differentiation of roles and institutions have independence from government.

Armstrong’s history begins with farmers and herdsmen of very early times. Soldiers emerged as leaders began invading other territories. Kings and emperors fought as empires emerged and fell. Religious leaders raised questions about pillaging, killing, conquering, and destruction. The prophets’ relationships to kings in the history of Israel are good examples of the power of the state and the faith leaders.

Armstrong first looks at very ancient groups and then brings the reader to the modern and post-modern eras. The first two parts form an important background of early Middle Eastern civilizations and describe early Jewish, Christian and Muslim eras. Though re-interpreted on the role of religion toward war and violence, much of these two parts has been published in other books by Armstrong. In the third part Armstrong interprets some of the violence and war in the last 150 years. She provides a deeper analysis that aided my understanding of what I have observed when I visited Turkey, Egypt, Palestine, and Iran. Turkey is secular and yet the Gulen movement has demanded rights for the religious.



Women can now wear head scarfs in universities, government offices and public buildings. Political leaders are being confronted on ethical issues, especially around fraud. Iran is experimenting with a blend of secularism and theocracy in government. Armstrong tells the story of the Ayatollah Khomeini gaining massive popular support for the 1979 revolution among many citizens, secular organizations as well as clergymen and highly religious people. Egypt has a difficult history with many generals opposed to the emerging Muslim Brotherhood. The reason for the popularity of the Brotherhood was their assistance to Egyptians with housing, health care, education, and food. But politically Morsi and others started to rule and became quite oppressive. The Arab Spring has had complex outcomes which she analyzes. Religious leaders and groups are often oppressed and therefore compromised. Can faith leaders play important roles now in making these countries more humane and respectful of human rights? When will faith leaders like Bishop Tutu in South Africa emerge in the Mid-east? Tutu was an important moderating force in that government change.

Militant groups operating today, especially in the Mideast, are confusing for many residents in North America and Europe. Armstrong investigates how they developed, what the leaders advocated for, and the resulting confusion. She looks at the effects of the western world's interference in the Mideast including the establishment of national borders, which did not respect ethnic and religious groups, followed by support for dictators in many countries. Margaret MacMillan, in her book *Paris 1919*, provides a longer description of this process of how countries were formed and leaders were chosen.

Secularism does not have a good track record in the Middle East as it is imposed on a variety of people without adequate education. One can point to democracy that is imposed on countries without an adequate understanding of the people's culture and history. Or one can look at the Second World War and the rise of the Nazis and various fascist governments which were secular. Armstrong states that "secularization has sometimes damaged religion." Or secularism has discounted the positive impact of religion in people's lives and in the building of communities. The university sees the secular as a higher value than the religious, not necessarily differentiating among different faith voices and minimizing the significant contributions of religious leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr., Desmond Tutu, Mother Teresa, Ghandi, Dorothy Day, and others.

If you wonder about the connection of religion and violence or have to defend Christianity and other faiths to people who make a quick conclusion that religious groups are competitive and violent toward each other, then I recommend reading *Fields of Blood*.

Armstrong reminds us that we live in a highly connected world in which messages move quickly. Yet in the midst of this overwhelming amount of knowledge, we need to see the larger trends and historical background so that we can work for peace, justice, and understanding in a world where there is still a colossal amount of violence and war.

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