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Buddhist Thoughts on The Battle for God: Is Fundamentalism a Good Reason to Ditch Religion?

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Buddhist Thoughts on *The Battle for God*

Is fundamentalism a good reason to ditch religion?

PHILIP NOVAK

THE BATTLE FOR GOD: A HISTORY OF
FUNDAMENTALISM

KAREN ARMSTRONG

New York: Ballantine Books, 2001

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NOT LONG AGO I taught a seminar on science and religion that required three of the most widely read gospels of the so-called new atheism: Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion*, Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell*, and Sam Harris's *The End of Faith*. As I read along, I found the Buddhist in myself in large agreement. After all, Gotama himself had been highly skeptical of the God-idea, involving as it often did an omnipotence he could not square with either the world's suffering or his belief in human freedom. And like these authors, Gotama rejected miracles. His central insight, dependent arising, left no logical space for supernatural interventions into the normal causal order of the world. Like them too, the Buddha urged a pragmatic empiricism, teaching his disciples to assess truth claims according to their wholesome or unwholesome results in action, and never to accept them on the basis of mere venerability, the authority of scripture, or the reputedly enlightened mind of the claimant.

Yet I also found myself pondering just what it was that finally set

Gotama's worldview distinctly apart from theirs: his plain dismissal of the kind of materialism they (or at least Dennett and Dawkins) espouse.

Materialism—the philosophical belief that matter alone exists and that consciousness and will are wholly due to material agency—was already a well-known option in Gotama's day, as were three of its central implications: (1) the finality of physical death—a position Gotama called annihilationism; (2) the illusion of freedom—that is, since we are physical creatures governed by the same determinative laws as other aspects of nature, the presumption that we can alter our behavior by our free choices is mistaken; and (3) the cosmic inconsequentiality of karma (the view that “morality” or “immorality” are human constructs that make absolutely no difference to the wider, amoral cosmos). The *Samannaphala Sutta* has one of Gotama's rivals putting this last point in the following way:

...To him who kills a living creature, who takes what is not given, who breaks into houses, who tells lies, to him thus acting, there is no guilt.... Were he to go along the south bank of the Ganges striking and slaying, mutilat-

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KAREN ARMSTRONG

AUTHOR OF *A HISTORY OF GOD*

THE BATTLE FOR

G O D



"One of the most penetrating, readable, and precise accounts to date of the rise of the fundamentalist movements in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam."

—*The New York Times Book Review*

ing...there would be no guilt thence resulting.... Were he to go along the north bank of the Ganges giving alms or causing them to be offered, there would be no merit thence resulting.... In generosity, in self-mastery, in control of the senses, in speaking truth, there is neither merit nor increase of merit.

Gotama clearly shunned each of these three implications. He rejected annihilationism, teaching instead that something did survive physical death: not an unchanging core (which would be the opposite error that he called eternalism), but our *sankharas*, if you will, the energy-pattern of our dispositions. He also rejected determinism.

Though mindful of the high degree to which human beings are conditioned, he nevertheless centrally affirmed that we are free enough in the present moment to be able to think and act in ways that can alter those conditions and make a difference to our own future and that of the world. And, not least, Gotama affirmed the cosmic consequentiality of karma. The wholesomeness or unwholesomeness of our actions is more than instrumentally meaningful, because it is related to something more than human selves or communities. This “something more” Gotama called *dhamma*, a cosmic lawfulness in which virtue is a necessary if not sufficient condition for the realization of freedom.

It is precisely Gotama’s nonacceptance of materialism as a view conducive to liberation (and his corresponding faith in dhamma and karma) that make him more deeply akin to theists like Jesus or Muhammad (and Buddhism to its cousin world religions) than to the critics of theism and religion he sometimes resembles. Note that the crucial issue dividing the two camps is not the desirability of goodness—both praise the virtuous life—but the source of that desire. The latter camp views our moral instincts as mysteriously adaptive emergents within a mindless, amoral universe. The former camp proclaims—in a range of dramatically different ways—that those instincts reflect a wider holy reality.

Our atheist critics of religion rejoin that it is largely religion’s penchant

for cosmic reference that has often undermined its ethical project, the evils occasioned by the God-idea outweighing the virtues engendered. The problem for this line of thought, apart from questionable accounting, is that the cost-benefit ratio looks every bit as bad on the other side. In the twentieth century, some 60 million or more civilian lives were sacrificed on the altars of purely secular ideologies such as Stalinism, Nazism, and Maoism. If these horrors taught us anything, it was that one doesn’t need God as an excuse to engage in massive carnage.

Taking a different tack, the atheists sometimes base their case on sheer implausibility. Can any intelligent modern person really believe that the cosmos is morally attuned? All we can say in reply is that apparently many do, and if those who do not should ever grow into a critical mass, they will have accomplished a remarkable reversal of a deep historical trend. Reflecting on the history of anthropological studies of religion, one of its deans, Clifford Geertz, confessed: “Though in theory we might think that a people could construct a wholly autonomous value system independent of any metaphysical referent, an ethics without ontology, *we do not in fact seem to have found such a people*. The tendency to synthesize worldview and ethos, at some level, if not logically necessary, is . . . pragmatically universal” (emphasis mine).

In any case, sociologist Robert Bellah reminds us that religions are

systems of symbols through which human beings relate themselves to the ultimate conditions of their existence and are therefore the chief ways in which people make—or discover—the very meanings they appear to be quite unable to live without. As permanent a part of the human repertoire as economics or politics, religion will not go extinct. On this point even Sam Harris seems to agree. In the midst of his trenchant critique of religious irrationality, the author of *The End of Faith* admits: “There is clearly a sacred dimension to our existence, and coming to terms with it could well be the highest purpose of human life. . . . A kernel of truth lurks at the heart of religion because spiritual experience, ethical behavior, and strong communities are essential for human happiness.”

But if religion is here to stay, so unfortunately are the plagues to which it is vulnerable. Over the past several decades a distinctively modern strain of religious extremism—popularly dubbed fundamentalism—has emerged worldwide to become a powerful, often polarizing, sometimes violent, social and political force. A decade after the appearance of its first edition, Karen Armstrong’s *The Battle for God*—reissued in 2001 with a post-9/11 preface—remains an unflinchingly instructive and strikingly relevant account of the rise of fundamentalism in the Abrahamic monotheisms—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Battle’s hundred-page first part narrates the ways in which Middle

Eastern Muslims, European Jews, and European and American Christians reacted, at different speeds and with different ratios of accommodation and resistance, to the global wave of secularism generated by scientific advance between the late fifteenth and the mid-nineteenth centuries. Its second part (200 pages), the core of the book, analyzes the evolution of fundamentalism in four specific locales: in Egypt among Sunni Muslims, in Iran among Shiites, in Israel among ultra-Orthodox Jews, and in America among Christian Protestants. Clearly, Armstrong's choices take us to the ideological heart of the movements that continue to be at the root of much of the world's geopolitical tension. And while Armstrong is always concerned

to identify the fears and fixations that fundamentalisms of all stripes share, her detailed historical approach also guarantees we will see that each has risen to political prominence through its own path and must be understood through its own distinct history.

To those concerned about religious fundamentalism (and who is not?), there is much in Armstrong's book that will both inform and surprise. Perhaps most important is that fundamentalism is, ironically, a largely modern phenomenon, a product of the very modern world it so vigorously condemns. While fundamentalists see themselves as returning to what lies at the basis of their religion, to a pure faith unadulterated by the sins of the modern world, this is in

fact a fantasy. It is because it is not traditional but distinctly modern—in its tactics and modes of communication—that religious fundamentalism must be understood in its historical context. To try to grasp it otherwise—as somehow a nonhistorical return to the real essentials of a tradition—is to accept the fundamentalists' own erroneous definition of their project. This is a big mistake indeed, and one that Armstrong goes about dismantling at every turn.

Another of Armstrong's leitmotifs is that though fundamentalism often becomes an *inter*-religious and *inter*-cultural antagonism, it rarely starts out that way. It often begins as *intra*-religious disagreement among co-religionists over the appropriate

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degree of compromise with secular agendas in their own cultural spheres. It is the protracted failure to win the hearts and minds even of those who are nominally of the same faith that often pushes otherwise merely conservative believers to the radical right we have come to label “fundamentalist.” Armstrong makes this case persuasively in all four of her examples, but it is nowhere more revealingly apparent than in the fascinating but relatively little-known history of Jewish fundamentalism in Israel.

Zionism, the movement to create and preserve the secular state of Israel as a Jewish homeland, is barely a hundred years old. Yet no sooner was it launched than it was fiercely opposed by religious Jews who found in the

idea of a “secular Israel” a contradiction so abominable, a betrayal so unthinkable, that undying resistance to it was the only possible future course. Still today there are ultra-Orthodox Jews who, despite residing there, “regard the State of Israel as inherently evil,” as Karen Armstrong puts it, citing Aviezer Ravitzky’s quote from author and ideologue Yerahmiel Domb that Zionism is “a pollution that encompasses all other pollutions, a complete heresy that includes all other heresies.” It is an extreme view, to be sure, but it serves to remind us that Jewish fundamentalism evolved largely as an in-house phenomenon, one side of a protracted war of ideas between religious and secular Jews.

But things did not stay that way. For between the poles of the often apolitical Jewish ultra-Orthodoxy, on the one hand, and highly political secular Zionism, on the other, there has emerged in twentieth-century Israel a complex spectrum of religiopolitical compromises and coalitions, all of which Armstrong navigates with admirable clarity; one of these is religious Zionism. Whereas secular Zionists have tended to deemphasize the religious subtext of the land claim, namely, that God has eternally granted to Jews a well-defined portion of the Earth’s surface as their special holy place, religious Zionists such as followers of Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook and members of the infamous Gush Emunim (“Bloc of the Faithful”),



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founded in 1974, invested the land claim with a metaphysical ultimacy that allowed for no pragmatic compromise. According to the Gush, the full spiritual redemption not only of Israel but of the entire world rests upon the Jewish reclamation of virtually every square inch of biblically defined ancient Israel. Jewish fundamentalism had become opposed to—and locked in a decidedly hotter war with—a far more comprehensive Other than earlier in the century.

In Armstrong's Egyptian Sunni Muslim narrative we glimpse a similar pattern, an intracultural war of ideas among Muslims over just how much accommodation is acceptable of the secular modernity that grows, at one of its edges, into a global declaration of war on just about everything non-

Islamic. Set in the context of British colonialism and the steady deterioration of economic and social conditions for the vast majority of the people, Armstrong's analysis of twentieth-century Egyptian Muslim disquiet can be read as a genealogy of al-Qaeda and is alone worth the price of the book.

THROUGHOUT her book, in the Jewish and Muslim sections as well as in the Christian and Shiite Muslim cases, Armstrong consistently portrays fundamentalism as arising out of the experience of great suffering. It evolves, she shows, as a frustrated reaction to despair born out of disruptive change and disorienting social anomie, or as a desperate counteroffensive to dignity-destroying physical impoverishment, or as a

defiant resistance to an erosion of values experienced as nothing less than an attack on life itself. Many of us applaud the courage of Tibetan and Burmese monks who, in the name of the dhamma, take to the streets to protest conditions they find painfully devoid of the sacred values the word *dhamma* enshrines. I think we must perceive a degree of kinship between them and those who, in the name of the Torah, or Shariah, or Christ, attempt to reclaim a world they find perilously drained of all sense of the sacred. But lest I leave the wrong impression, Armstrong is no apologist for extremism. She pointedly censures the paranoid xenophobias, distorting literalisms—in her terms, misconceived efforts to turn *mythos* into *logos*—and

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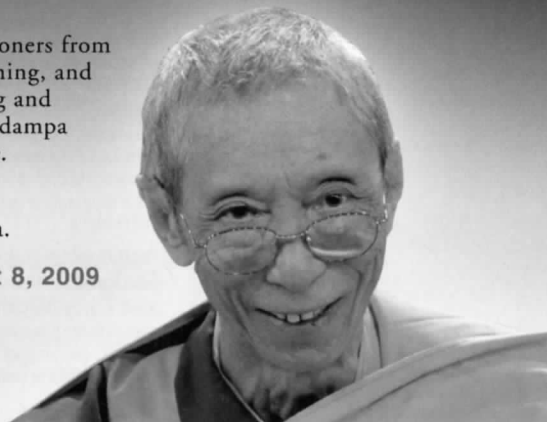
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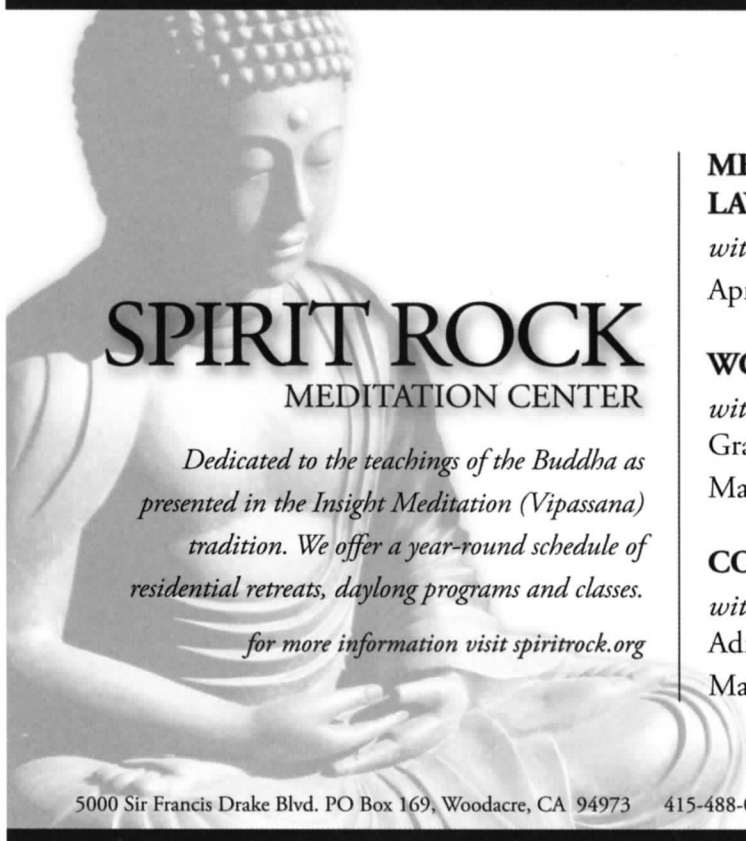
pathological hatreds that too often turn fundamentalist forms of political theology into counterfeits of genuine religious faith. Moreover, Armstrong categorically condemns violence. When fundamentalists murder in pursuit of their goals, they violate compassion, in her view the *sine qua non* of religious legitimacy. Nevertheless, fundamentalism's often rash campaign to resacralize what is seen as an increasingly desacralized world, Armstrong warns, "represents a widespread disappointment, alienation, anxiety, and rage that no government can safely ignore."

I suspect Armstrong wrote *Battle* not only because she saw that the world needed such a study but also because, by demarcating fundamen-

talism, she could help keep it from eclipsing that to which most of her oeuvre pays tribute: the constructive power of religion and the perennial importance of the spiritual life. Armstrong's work stands in the spirit of pluralist historians and philosophers of religion like Wilfred Cantwell Smith and John Hick, who have equipped us to see that there exists a single planetary spiritual history of humankind, and that our own Islamic, Buddhist, Native American, Jewish, and Christian traditions are but strands in that single history. From this vantage point, the world's religions are culturally varied responses to an ineffable Real, functioning as vast enabling contexts for the ethical education of humanity and inviting us to discover in our-

selves a limitlessly better condition as we move from natural self-centeredness to a re-centering in a higher order of existence, a movement that everywhere authenticates itself by essentially the same signature virtues: justice, honesty, generosity, patience, kindness, compassion. Armstrong's efforts help us to recall that despite the abuses to which the God-idea can succumb, it remains most of the world's preferred way of saying that the selflessness to which we all at our best aspire abides in the very nature of things. ▼

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