

Naval War College Review

Volume 69
Number 2 *Spring*

Article 24

2016

Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence

Karen Armstrong

Jacqueline E. Whitt

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Armstrong, Karen and Whitt, Jacqueline E. (2016) "Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 69 : No. 2 , Article 24.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol69/iss2/24>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

as Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus's 2015 revision of the same) then provide the thematic foundation for the book's articles on cooperation and partnership.

This anthology initiates a discussion of which types of missions and tasks are included in GMP. Collectively, they can be developed into a naval cooperation operations framework or operating concept, as described in the U.S. maritime strategy. GMP missions can be conceptualized across a scale of complexity from combat operations at sea, through maritime operations in support of combat operations ashore and freedom-of-the-seas operations that include naval operations to secure seaborne commerce and trade, to training activities such as multinational or bilateral exercises and military-to-military engagement.

In a 2014 article, Admiral Jonathan Greenert and Rear Admiral James Foggo consider the employment of a "Global Network of Navies" in the execution of GMP. Their concept does not focus on the specific number of ships engaged in maritime partnership activities during a specific period, but rather concentrates on the collective effect of a flexible network of partners engaged in cooperative operations and independent national and naval tasking in the maritime environment.

Other contributors argue that GMP can be used to accomplish common naval tasks among navies, thereby conserving resources by replacing one state's maritime forces with international naval forces. For example, in an article originally published in 2013, Rear Admiral Michael Smith, USN, argues that U.S. naval planners should include allied and partner navy contributions in operational plans. The opposing view envisions GMP as an employment that diverts forces

and resources from national military commitments and operations into missions that build partnership capacity.

Naval Cooperation brings the "wheel book" analogy to life. It inspires reflection on previous arguments and observations regarding maritime partnership and cooperation by providing a collection of ideas from the past. This collection enables a comparative or trend analysis of the objectives and impact of U.S. maritime strategy over time. This edition stimulates further evaluation of the effectiveness of partnership and cooperation activities and their progress toward those objectives. This book will stimulate a reader's thoughts on the opportunities and challenges of global maritime partnership and cooperation among international navies.

SEAN SULLIVAN



Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence, by Karen Armstrong. New York: Knopf, 2014. 512 pages. \$30.

Karen Armstrong's *Fields of Blood* may be an unconventional choice for traditional military historians; it is more a work of comparative religion than a work of military history, and attention to military matters of strategy, operations, or tactics is thin. Nevertheless, for historians interested in the causes of wars, the social and cultural history of war, or the relationship between religion and violence more broadly, Armstrong delivers an important addition to a growing interdisciplinary literature.

Armstrong, though not an academic, is well known for her sweeping, expansive works on comparative religion, with a

particular emphasis on the Abrahamic traditions. Known for books such as *A History of God* (1993) and *A Case for God* (2009) as well as *Islam: A Short History* (2000) and *Muhammad: A Prophet for Our Time* (2006), Armstrong has staked her claim with religious apologists. In *Fields of Blood*, Armstrong takes on Western secularist critics who argue that religion is a fundamental source of violence in the modern world (and was in the premodern world as well).

Instead, Armstrong argues, our modern conception of “religion” is inadequate for understanding the intimate relationship between the sacred and the secular that existed before the early modern period and the development of the secular state. Armstrong instead sees the origins of systemic, structural violence as inherent in the development of agrarian civilizations, which she explores in chapters on Eurasia, the Indus valley, China, and Mesopotamia. Armstrong contends that emerging religious systems served both to explain and to rationalize, and in some cases to reject, the violence endemic to the maintenance of empire.

In the second part of the book, Armstrong explores the development of Christianity and Islam and concludes with a long chapter on the traditions of crusade and jihad. Armstrong rejects an essentialist version of either Christianity or Islam that would mandate violence, and instead places both into a more nuanced political context.

In the final part of the book, which covers the ground most familiar to the average reader, Armstrong details the development of the modern Western idea of “religion” as being personal and private; the advent of Lockean political philosophy that advocated the separation of church and state; and the rise of

the liberal, secular nation-state. The last several chapters are devoted to understanding religious backlash against this trend of secularization. Even here, Armstrong rejects the premise that “fundamentalism” is inherently violent, writing, “Only a tiny proportion of fundamentalists commit acts of terror; most are simply trying to live a devout life in a world that seems increasingly hostile to faith” (p. 303). In this last part of the book, Armstrong also seeks to make sense of terrorism and “global jihad.” Unsurprisingly, Armstrong places culpability for both at the feet of colonialism, modernity, and political struggle, and suggests that “religion” may motivate actors on nearly any side of a given conflict. She writes, “Identical religious beliefs and practices have inspired diametrically opposed courses of action” (p. 393).

Fields of Blood is a survey; certainly scholars of any region and era will find details with which to quibble, and they may believe that one important event or another is treated too cursorily. Yet as an introduction to the complex historical relationships between the world’s major religious traditions and violence, it serves its purpose quite well. And given the recent attention to religious extremism and the rise of Daesh (also known as ISIS, ISIL, or the Islamic State), Armstrong’s work should be taken seriously by any who wish to understand the complex interplay among religion, politics, economics, and violence. Although Armstrong rejects the view that religion is inherently violent, this work takes an important step toward understanding religion as simply epiphenomenal to political violence.

JACQUELINE E. WHITT