

Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence. By Karen Armstrong. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014. 528 pp. Hardback \$30.00, ISBN: 9780307957047.

Karen Armstrong's latest defense of religion focuses on the controversial question of religion and violence. As with *A History of God*, written over two decades ago, *Fields of Blood* narrates the history of multiple religious traditions from their beginnings to the present. Progressing beyond the monotheistic traditions, though, her most recent work discusses ancient Middle Eastern and Eastern traditions as well. Consequently, though aimed at a popular audience, the book is well-suited for an undergraduate survey course, as it covers a breadth of material with a compelling narrative. Yet while *Fields of Blood* clearly demonstrates that religion is not inherently violent, it marshals insufficient evidence to convince the reader, as the book jacket claims, "that religion is not the problem."

The work is divided into three parts, "Beginnings," "Keeping the Peace," and "Modernity," which correspond roughly to before the Common Era, the Common Era up to the sixteenth century, and thence to the present. Within the first few pages we are presented with the fundamental dilemma of the text: How can one debunk the "myth of religious violence" while maintaining the historical inextricability of religion and politics? Armstrong's contends that religions arose not as violent but as a response to violence, a means to cope with the structural violence of agrarian society (9). Agricultural civilizations relied on societal inequities that manifested in violence and warfare, but without these inequities, society could not have advanced (14). Religion justified that structural violence, investing human action with divine meaning (26).

The author insists though religion usually endorsed imperial violence, it also "regularly called it into question" (43). When religion was uncomfortable with violence, it faced the dilemma of civilization that Armstrong first poses through Ashoka, the would-be pacifist king of third-century BCE India. Despite the inherent violence of empire, it also provides the best means to maintain peace (71). This same dilemma dogs Confucian reformers and the Hebrew people, whom Yahweh called to be herders, but who needed society—with all its violence—to survive (107). Armstrong's ancient religions are not bloodthirsty, but are necessarily reluctant participants in the harsh realities of social advancement. At the end of Part I, then, she claims that religion was neither solely responsible for violence nor necessarily violent, but "a template that can be modified and altered radically to serve a variety of ends" (124).

In Part II, which deals primarily with the growth of Christianity and Islam, the link between religion and politics becomes more complicated. In Part I

religion arises to justify violence and thrives to the degree it makes peace with the structural violence of civilization. Here, while trying to maintain this inextricability of religion and politics, Armstrong increasingly associates moral failings with the political side of the religio-political hybrid. Politics and religion were inseparable in the mission of Jesus (138) and martyrdom was a political and religious choice (152). However, when Muhammad had the men of a Jewish tribe in Medina slaughtered for betraying him, he did so “for political rather than religious reasons” (183). Similarly, under Charlemagne, forced baptisms “were statements of political rather than spiritual alignment” (204). Instead of a “myth of religious violence,” Armstrong employs a myth of original purity, indicating that the earliest interpretations of religion were the most authentic. Thus the later Johannine Christians made Jesus God and made his global compassion exclusive to their group (144), and “more devout Muslims” were correspondingly more disturbed by the violence of interne-cine warfare than their (presumably less devout) brethren (193). These are significant distinctions, but only to the degree we can distinguish between something called “religion” and something called “politics.”

In Part III, Armstrong suggests that the secular nation-state is responsible for as much violence as the religion from which it was artificially separated. The Reformation and the continental tumult that followed tested the ideological waters of a separate sphere for religion from politics, and the Enlightenment cemented it in European political life. In rightly contesting the founding myth of modernity that religion is inherently violent, she quietly accepts its thrust that religion and politics are and should be separable. She argues it is anachronistic to blame the violence of the Thirty Years’ War on religion because prior to 1700, religion was yet indistinguishable from politics (256). Yet once the separation of church and state is effected, the liberal secular state bears the responsibility for structural violence and thus we cannot meaningfully discuss the relationship between religion and violence. For example, industrialization and the colonialism of the imperial age were driven “not by religion but by the wholly secular values of the market” (285). Weber for one would disagree that religion was entirely disconnected from market capitalism. Even if religion played only an ancillary role in modern national development, though, it’s not clear how this ambiguous relationship is fundamentally different than the one Armstrong has described from ancient Sumer on.

The last three chapters untangle the complex political developments between the “West and the rest” from the twentieth century. Armstrong rightly critiques modern Western nations for a proclivity toward violence. Western support of secular autocratic regimes in the Middle East is understandably interpreted as a threat to religious identities (316), and moral superiority

does not simply consist of relabeling murder as collateral damage (391). Yet it does not follow that the Holocaust shows the bankruptcy of a secular state that doesn't value the sacredness of humanity (341). In fact, in *Homo Sacer* Giorgio Agamben argues it is precisely the ability to "make sacred" that enables genocidal action. Armstrong's conclusion is rather that society might need more religion (381). Discussing the pre-flight rituals of the 9/11 terrorists she comments, "[t]o imagine that a possibility of serenity and joy would be possible in such circumstances indicates a truly psychotic inability to relate their faith with the reality of what they were about to do" (384). Would this comment apply differently to the complex relationship of religio-politics and violence throughout history?

It is difficult to accept Armstrong's argument that religion's complicity with societal violence throughout ancient history was largely unavoidable alongside the suggestion that it constitutes the moral high ground in modernity. In the end, while *Fields of Blood* "makes vividly clear that religion is not *the* problem," it does not make clear that it has not been *a* problem. Distancing religion from violence not only belies the religio-political link Armstrong works tirelessly to demonstrate in the pre-modern world, but commits the same error as those who blame religion for societal violence. In the most charitable light, both are trying to alleviate violence, but neither allows us to assess the extent of religion's relationship with violence, historically and in the present. Despite this critique, *Fields of Blood* does more good than harm, so long as it continues as a beginning and not as an end to a more informed public conversation about the relationship between religion, the state, and the violence attending to both.

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