

BOOK REVIEW

***Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence.* Karen Armstrong. London: The Bodley Head, 2014. Pp. 499.**

The blood that has been spilled over the history of human race is real, but to accuse religion, as most literature coming out of the west does, is not. Of course, the images of fanatics slaughtering ‘infidels’ on the shores of Mediterranean, and pointing their knives towards ‘Rome’ would inspire such literature. But to ‘scapegoat’ this violence as being inspired by religion has never been scientifically validated. No religion in human history ever condoned violence. Even Yahweh is concerned when he finds Abel missing and asked Cain after he murdered his brother Abel: “Where is your brother, Abel?” Having murdered his brother, his immediate response is: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Violence was never ordained by God and religion, “whose practice is essentially private and hermetically sealed off from all ‘secular’ activities.” According to Karen Armstrong, in her latest book *Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence*, modern and secular “Urban civilization denied that relationship and responsibility for all other human beings that is embedded in human nature.” At great lengths throughout the book, Armstrong describes the word ‘secular’ as being concerned with the material things of the world, while religion is not abstract, but transcends our personal needs and serves as a bond that unites man to the divine, and to one another.

In a pre-modern world, Armstrong contends, religion pervaded all that people of those times did because they wanted to invest everything they did with ultimate value. Religion for them was a whole way of life and activities. They were much more conscious and aware of the mysteries of the cosmos, whereas the modern man has now become much more troubled by our physical and psychological frailty, and human cruelty.

Armstrong’s reasoning of violence as being part of human nature and embedded in their genes appears convincing. Armstrong argues that as man evolved through the ages, so did his limbic emotions. She maintains that each of us has not one but three brains. The old one resides in the

recesses of our grey matter inherited from the reptiles that crawled out of primal slime some 500 million years ago, intent on their own survival for food, territory, and reproduction. But with evolution some 120 million years ago, humans evolved, what neuro-scientists call, the limbic system that formed over the core brain, and which motivated new behaviors such as caring for the young and formation of alliances that were invaluable in the struggle for survival. And, some twenty thousand years ago, even with our “me-first” drives issuing from the core of our reptilian brain, humans evolved a “hard-wiring for empathy” that enabled them to stand back from the instinctive, primitive passions. Humans evolved the “neo-cortex,” the third brain, which enabled them to overcome their primitive impulses and develop the power of reasoning and self-awareness. Humans became as they are today, subject to the conflicting impulses of their three distinct brains. Societies evolved from hunter-gatherers to agricultural ones. But while even the Paleolithic men felt sympathy towards the creatures they killed, the agriculturists felt no such qualms as they became tightly bonded teams that were the seeds of modern armies.

The evolution of religion, Armstrong argues, was to cultivate a sense of community with nature, the animal world, and with fellow humans. But humans, as Armstrong points out, could never forget their hunter-gatherer past, the longest period in human history. The human brain awash in serotonin, responsible for the sensation of ecstasy, came to associate violent pursuits, as religious activities. In the midst of conflict, the warriors become ‘inhuman’ exaggerating their differences – racial, religious, or ideological – convincing themselves of fighting for God and country.

As the narrative on religion and violence unfolds page after page, it will become difficult for all those interested in history to put the book down as Armstrong takes the reader through the various stages of the development of human civilizations; and the part played by religion in all of these, from the story of Gilgamesh to Ashoka, from Confucius to Moses, Jesus and Mohammad. As you thumb through history, it becomes evident that human cruelties have had little or no religious connotations. Almost all of them reek of organized theft through warfare. But even in all their warfare, strutting and trampling of people, their cries to the gods of

Sumerian, Indian, Hebrew and Christian civilizations broke through the horrifying realities of war, forcing for example Gilgamesh and Ashoka to accept the limitations of their humanity when the horrifying realities of warfare and sufferings broke through their glamour and heartlessness.

Juxtaposed with history, Armstrong describes the struggle between the state (read empires), and religion in great detail, explaining how people chose to intertwine religion with all their activities including state and politics. This intermixing of religion with political ends often resulted in violence, but as Armstrong points out again and again, the latter was always the result of politics rather than religion, because politics “was obliged to maintain at its heart an institution committed to treachery and violence.”

Armstrong has taken laborious academic pains to describe the impossibility of any religious tradition and its unchanging essence that inspired violence. The Jews, Christians and Muslims all make the Biblical God a symbol of absolute transcendence. The Hebrew priests insisted that the “otherness” of every single creature was sacred, the mission of Jesus was essentially to point out that the house of God had been turned into a “den of thieves,” and the early Muslim caliphs endeavored to restore Christian shrines and clearing Jewish temples of garbage and resisting the systemic oppression and violence of empire.

With the rise of commercial economy in Europe came the creation of a very different kind of state and religion that used the Church for extorting money from gullible people. Thus began the Reformation of Martin Luther (1483-1546) joined by people like Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin, convinced of the absolute power of God alone to save them, giving rise to religious wars and debates on Christianity and the disruptive forces of religion, by such crucial figures as Lord Herbert of Cherbury, Rene Descartes, John Locke and Thomas Hobbes, which ultimately led to the separation of religion from politics, and what Armstrong calls “the triumph of secular.” Religion was banished to the private sphere. Even in modern times, the violence perpetrated by the French revolution, the American civil war, Hitler’s exterminations, Stalin’s purges and opium wars in China had little to do with religion.

The rise of the fundamentalism - Jewish, Christian or Muslim - Armstrong expounds is not a violent phenomenon. Only a tiny portion of fundamentalists commit acts of terror, most are trying to live a life in a world that seems increasingly hostile to faith. Modern religious violence is therefore not an alien growth, but part of the modern scene caused “by our inability to see the relationship with our economic and historical situation ... as we wrestle with – in secular and religious ways – with ‘nothingness’, the void at the heart of modern culture.”

As Armstrong argues, even experts in political violence or terrorism insist that people commit atrocities for a complex range of reasons, chief among them being social, material and ideological, and competition for scarce resources. But since the idea that religion is inherently violent is taken for granted in the modern West of today, it “has made a scapegoat of faith,” constantly laying the blame of all the violence of the 21st century on the doors of religion.

The book is a recommended reading for all those who wish to come to grips with the anatomy of violence and understand why it pervades our times.

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