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Karen Armstrong, *Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence*. New York: Knopf, 2014. Pp. 512. ISBN 978-0-307-95704-7.

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In *Fields of Blood*, the prolific historian of religions Karen Armstrong¹ argues that religion has been “scapegoated” for violence that is in fact “embedded in our human nature and the nature of the state, which from the start required the forcible subjugation of at least 90 percent of the population” (394). Beginning with ancient Sumer, she surveys how human civilization and most major world religions have developed. Religion’s proper role, she asserts, is to foster alternative ways of life that renounce violence and exploitation.

Citizens of Western nation-states scapegoat religion, Armstrong maintains, because they do not understand how modern the privatization of faith is. “The idea of religion as an essentially personal and systematic pursuit was entirely absent from classical Greece, Japan, Egypt, Mesopotamia, Iran, China, and India” (4). Religion, she argues, was an adjunct to the centralized states that came to dominate these societies. What we usually attribute to ancient government-affiliated religious establishments should therefore be attributed to the governments themselves.

Armstrong first examines Mesopotamia. “The Sumerians seem to have been the first people to commandeer the agricultural surplus grown by the community and create a privileged ruling class” (22). The social stratification inherent in this system was a departure from the more “egalitarian norm” of hunter-gatherer societies. The Sumerian elite sanctified this social inequality by ascribing it to a divine order. The Sumerians and other ancient peoples after them firmly believed their stratified society “was somehow enshrined in the very nature of things and that even the gods were bound by it” (25).

Hence the Babylonian king Hammurabi could claim that “he had been appointed by the gods ‘to cause justice to prevail in the land, to destroy the wicked and the evil, that the strong might not oppress the weak...’ [For ancient Middle Eastern rulers,] promulgating ... laws was little more than a political exercise in which the king claimed that he was powerful enough to bypass the lower aristocrats and become a supreme court of appeal to the oppressed masses” (39). Because the vast majority of Sumerians were forced to produce for the elite, they had to be convinced to see their subordinate position as entirely natural. “This was a theocracy in which everybody—from the highest aristocrat to the lowest artisan—performed a sacred activity” (25). Religion, Armstrong writes, arose as a justification, not a cause, of this systemic inequality and the violence necessary to solidify it.

The Sumerians were the first to use religion to justify the structural violence inherent in human civilization. They were also the first to develop criticism of the established order. Writing, invented for administrative purposes, allowed ancient Mesopotamians to articulate the grievances of the have-nots. The *Atrahasis* epic (ca. 1700 BCE) chronicled a revolt in which the Igigi, demigods consigned to manual labor, successfully rose against the Anunnaki, or divine aristocracy. After this rebellion, Enki, the Anunnaki’s “minister of agriculture” (24, 27), created humans to till the soil in place of the Igigi. “Thus writing, originally intended to serve the structural violence of Sumer, began to record the disquiet of the more thoughtful members of the ruling class, who could find no solution to civilization’s dilemma but tried at least to look squarely at the problem” (28). Religion came to play this critical role in each of the traditions Armstrong examines.

Like the Sumerians, the Aryans who invaded the Indian subcontinent from the Caucasus region used religion to justify the violence that underlay their social organization. Nomadic warriors, the Aryans ac-

1. Among the best known of her some two dozen books are *Holy War: The Crusades and Their Impact on Today’s World* (NY: Doubleday, 1991) and *The Case for God* (NY: Knopf, 2009).

quired needed resources by marauding rather than farming. To rationalize this arrangement, they developed the concept of a cosmic order (*rita*) enforced by a group of gods (*devas*) who suppressed the forces of disorder. The Aryans convinced themselves that their raids on weaker groups were not simply a prosaic attempt to stay alive, but a reenactment of a divine drama in which their victims, the “barbaric” *dasas*, were cast in the antagonistic role. “Aryans,” writes Armstrong, “had absorbed the tragic fact that life depends upon the destruction of other beings” (32).

For the Aryans, religion was also instrumental in the redistribution of the wealth acquired from raids. During the *vidatha* festival, one chieftain (*raja*) would host members of the elite at a riotous banquet. He would distribute the loot to his companions as their subordinates ate, drank, and had sex, all to excess. “This was not just a glorified party.... It was essential to the Aryan economy: a ritualized way of redistributing recently acquired resources with reasonable equity and imposing an obligation on other clans to reciprocate” (48).

At this point, we see a leitmotif emerging: human societies have, to be sure, often used religion to sanctify the violent processes on which they depend. But that does not mean, Armstrong insists, that these societies would have been any less violent had religion been removed from the equation. Religious traditions, she shows, have been remarkably adaptable, changing along with the societies they were intended to validate. Once the Aryans expanded into the Indian subcontinent, they found themselves ruling over farmers, and “now had to integrate the *dasas*, the native farmers with agricultural knowhow [*sic*], into their community, so the Vritra myths demonizing the *dasas* were becoming obsolete, since without their labor and expertise, the agrarian economy would fail” (51). The Vedic tradition now divided Aryan society into four castes, the kernel of India’s persistent caste system. Such adaptations strengthen Armstrong’s argument that religion is merely a consequent of the stratification that always accompanies human civilization.

This consequent has become a tool of social criticism. Just as ancient Sumerians addressed the grievances of the dispossessed in the *Atrahasis*, the priestly Aryan caste developed the Upanishad tradition, which led to the idea of *karma*, the belief that individuals’ status in the afterlife depended on how assiduously they had performed their religious duties. This doctrine deviated from previous Aryan tradition, which located “liberation” (*moksha*) in ritual preparation for fighting. But the Upanishads also owed their existence to the affluence that Aryan society had generated through conquest: “The new wealth gave the nobility the time and leisure that was essential for such introspective contemplation. The new spirituality was, therefore, strictly for the aristocracy” (60). This is the paradox of human civilization: the role of religion was partly dependent on the violence and exploitation it was meant to criticize. There would be no “art” without the wealth and leisure that structural violence afforded a small group of elite authors.

The first Chinese emperors also relied on religion to solidify their privileged place atop the social order. Shang Dynasty kings enjoyed sole access to the sky god Di Shang Di and were supported by an aristocracy “devote[d] to three sacred activities that all involved the taking of life: sacrifice, warfare and hunting.” The aristocrats, in turn, were supported by the *min*, or common people, who “took no part in any of these pursuits.” Under the Shang Dynasty, Armstrong shows, “violence was the *raison d’être* and distinguishing characteristic of the nobility.... [Thus,] Shang rituals were violent, because martial aggression was essential to the state” (81, 83).

Confucius (ca. 551–479 BCE) turned this tradition on its head: “his ideal of equality based on a cultivated perception of our shared humanity was a radical challenge to the systemic violence of agrarian China.” The most recognizable trait of a true *junzi* (“gentleman”) was *ren*, (roughly, “benevolence”). “A true *junzi*,” Confucius asserted, “had to look into his heart, discover what gave him pain, and then refuse under any circumstances to inflict that pain on anybody else” (88). Confucius, like Jesus with his “Golden Rule,” was performing religion’s essential role, appealing to a standard of human behavior that transcended the prevailing social order.

Indeed, Armstrong shows that Jesus’s mission cannot be properly understood apart from its social and economic aspects.

The crowds who thronged around Jesus in Galilee were hungry, distressed, and sick. In his parables we see a society split between the very rich and the very poor: people who are desperate for loans; peasants who are heavily indebted; and the dispossessed who have to hire themselves out as day laborers.... From the start, the gospels present Jesus as an alternative to the structural violence of imperial rule.... The poor were the only people who could be “blessed,”² because anybody who benefited in any way from the systemic violence of imperial rule was implicated in their plight.... The Lord’s Prayer is for people who were terrified of falling into debt and could hope only for bare subsistence, one day at a time. (137, 140)

For Armstrong, the ancient Hebrew tradition is anomalous because it was not created to justify the existence of an aristocratic elite. “From the very beginning the Hebrew Bible strikes a different note from most of the texts we have considered so far. Its heroes were not members of an aristocratic elite; Adam and Eve had been relegated to mere field hands, scratching a miserable subsistence from the blighted land” (103).³ Patriarchal society seemed to resist rather than endorse the structural violence of agrarian society: “in the Pentateuch [Yahweh] fights earthly empires to establish a people rather than a cosmos” (106), unlike the Aryans and the Sumerians. This theological posture was due to ancient Israel’s social and economic position: “Doomed to marginality, Israel would always be vulnerable to more powerful states” (108).

Political necessity forced the Hebrews to adapt. The rise of the Babylonian empire convinced the Jews that survival meant creating a strong state. Jewish scriptural tradition reflects this realization: “in seventh-century Judah, reformers who dreamed of independence but were terrified by the aggression of the great imperial powers brought a wholly new intransigence into the cult Yahweh.” Here, again, we detect a common theme. “Fear of annihilation and the experience of state violence often radicalize a religious tradition” (116). “A century or more of experiencing the strong rule of such monarchs as Nebuchadnezzar and Darius may have led to the desire to make Yahweh as powerful as they [sic]” (127). After the Maccabean revolt (175 BCE), “the Hasmoneans’ piety was unable to sustain the brute realities of political dominance, and they became as cruel and tyrannical as the Seleucids” (132). Again, political, social, and economic necessity found expression in adaptations of religious tradition.

There was nothing inherently violent about Islam, either. For Muslims, the Quranic revelation was necessarily inclusive: “The Quran was to them simply the latest in the unfolding revelation of Allah to the descendants of Abraham, a ‘reminder’ of what everybody knew already” (180). Seeing the structural violence upon which the pre-Islamic Meccan economy was based, Muhammad exhorted Muslims “to take responsibility for one another and feed the destitute, even when they were hungry themselves” (181). Like Jesus, Muhammad set out to challenge the social order under which he lived by caring for its marginalized members. Certainly, he and his followers had to use violence to gain control of Medina and Mecca, but *jihad* was itself a malleable term: “The ‘surrender’ of Islam [sic] requires a constant jihad against our inherent selfishness; this sometimes involves fighting (*qital*), but bearing trials courageously and giving to the poor in times of personal hardship was also described as jihad” (184).

As the Muslim empire spread beyond the Arabian peninsula and into North Africa, these aspects of Islam faded and more militant strains in the tradition surfaced. The geographical expansion of Islam itself had nothing to do with the inherent militancy of the religion. Rather, Armstrong argues, the first four caliphs were motivated by the need to acquire more resources for their followers. Just as the anti-agrarian ethos of the ancient Hebrews succumbed to the rise of a Jewish state under Hasmonean rule, Islam adapted to the economic and political needs of its practitioners between the seventh and the ninth centuries CE. As in all the other religious traditions Armstrong studies, politics and economics compelled religion to adapt, and not vice versa.

Armstrong carries this line of argument through more recent historical periods. She sees the Crusades as the product of political competition between the papacy and emerging European nation-states. The French Revolution proved that brutalities committed in the name of abstract political ideals could be every

2. Cf. Matt. 5:3: “Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (KJV).

3. Cf. Gen. 3:19: “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return” (KJV).

bit as destructive as “religiously motivated” violence. In the twentieth century, the author attributes both the Armenian genocide and the Holocaust to nationalistic rather than religious motives. In our own day, she writes, global jihad has more to do with Western political, economic, and military involvement in the Middle East than any “clash” of religious traditions. Moreover, in her view, explicit resistance to organized religion has done nothing to abate the systemic violence that has persisted since the agrarian empires of ancient Sumer.

My only reservations about *Fields of Blood* concern its scope and its conclusion. The too ambitious, breathless survey of religious traditions will leave specialists dissatisfied with her treatment of their particular time period. And, too, the closing paean to the value of mutual understanding between religious traditions, however eloquent and heartfelt, will strike many as simplistic and trite. Nonetheless, despite these venial sins, Karen Armstrong has provided an informed, logical demonstration that religion is not solely responsible for the violence inherent in human society. Indeed, her review of disparate faith traditions suggests that it may offer the best means to stop or mitigate that violence.