

This talk is centred on the ideas expressed in: *Fields of Blood – Religion and the History of Violence* By Karen Armstrong

Given the upheaval in the world today, often based upon alleged religious conflict, I suggested this book to my book club. I had to apologize to them somewhat because it turned out to be the history of the European and Asian worlds with regard to the topic – very extensively covered. As a history major myself I did not find this cumbersome, but others without my pre-vocational interests in history found it hard yakka to get through.

Nonetheless, we were all glad we read at least her introduction, which introduces her theory about civilizations and violence, and see her theories applied to some part of history. I was also glad to read it because it made me much more aware of 20th Century history in detail of the middle East which has led to some of our current problems in that volatile area.

To begin with Armstrong states boldly **I believe modern society has made a scapegoat of faith.**

Firstly she does state that people have, in history, acted boldly, and indeed violently in an attitude that “God is on our side”. However, if looked at more deeply these wars were more about

competition for scarce resources, the gaining of power from outside a country or state rather than over religion itself.

Religion is a relatively modern word, only understood in more recent centuries. For some, religion it is a way of life, in Arabic it is called “din” or in Sanskrit “dharma” = a more or less total concept of life, justice, morals. It is about the make up of life in a society and how it relates to its natural world. As Morandir explained, religion, culture, ethics and tradition were all wrapped up in one complex ball to ancient peoples. It is not seen as a personal pursuit or interest, as usually seen in the Western world today. This modern concept is absent from classical Greece, Japan, Egypt Mesopotamia, Iran, China and India. Even the Hebrew Bible doesn't describe religion as a personal pursuit.

For most societies of the past it is impossible to separate religion and politics. Armstrong explains this basic human need in the following words: **Feeling ourselves connected to such extraordinary realities satisfies an essential craving. It touches us within, lifts us momentarily beyond ourselves, so that we seem to inhabit our humanity more fully than usual and feel in touch with deeper currents of life.**

Religion comes from the Latin RELIGIO, an imprecise word connotative of *obligation* and definition of what is taboo. It is about

keeping a promise. Early Christians saw it as a reverence to God. St.. Augustine added to this meaning a personal encounter with a transcending God, a uniting bond between God and one another. In the middle ages the monks who separated themselves from mainstream society to pray and worship God became **religious** priests, given their commitments, while **secular** priests worked among the people of every day life.

Armstrong continues to assert that from religious observances, to art, music, sex, drugs or warfare, human beings can trigger a personal ecstatic experience. Then she talks about the human mind and how war and religion affect it.

She claims that in our “**old brain**”, the flee or fight response, the urge to reproduce, seek self-preservation first and foremost, is about survival of the species. There is nothing altruistic about this “old brain” in us all.

On the other hand, a newer part of human evolution is the **Limbic** part of the brain that came into our development about 120 million years ago. This is the part of our brain that encourages us to care for our young, encourages us to form alliances with one another, and helps our group to survive, where we cherish or care for others. Evolutionarily speaking humans became hard wired for

empathy. This is also the part of the brain that is stimulated by meditation and other out-of-self faith experiences.

Finally, appearing on 20,000 years ago in our brain development is the third part of our brain – the **reasoning** part of the brain. This part makes us self aware, appreciates art, ritual and religious experiences, a sense of community. It allows us to stand back and negotiate between our other brains that are hard wired within us.

From early in human civilization then religion and the desire to cultivate a sense of community, a connection with nature, the animal world and the each other became a major human preoccupation. We had to find a balance between our survival brain that was comfortable destroying animals to eat and survive, and our empathetic selves that empathised with the pain of the dying animal. Armstrong demonstrates this in the ancient paintings in the caves of France.

Hunting parties of ancient groups of people attained not only food, but gained the thrill of the hunt, and the joy in teamwork. It is a version of an ecstatic experience that the old brain reacts to. Likewise, going to war has a similar effect. War means then **surrender to the reptilian ruthlessness** we are capable of, creating a sort of ecstasy. This ecstatic experience is the adrenalin high we gain when working within a group, in group survival and

achievement. I recall hearing on the TV stories of Vietnam Vets about their experiences in that awful war. They said things to the effect that though they did horrible things they are not now proud of, but the sense of group mission and companionship they had there was not replicable in normal society, and they missed it. Perhaps ANZAC Day is an institutionalized day to recreate this feeling. War gives us a resolve, a cause, allowing us to feel noble while we are violent.

In order to take to the violence of war, it is imperative that fighters see the enemy as different, as *the other*. The differences may be racial, faith-based, or geographical. Often it is about seeking the resources of another group. By depersonalizing other creatures essentially no different than us, we overcome our affiliative nature and inflame our reptilian selves for a war that is somehow considered just, legal, and even, possibly “on God’s command.”

Armstrong asserts that between 9000 and 8000 BCE human societies moved from hunter-gatherers to become farmers. Whereas hunter-gatherer societies required that everyone work together to survive and all were therefore equal in that society, Armstrong asserts that once societies became agrarian, dependent upon agriculture, civilized warfare between societies came more into being. Furthermore, within the agrarian society itself it soon became clear that an excess of food would be apparent, having

more than was needed. Before long a canny small minority of the group, perhaps 2%, would hold the wealth and luxury of not having to work in the drudgery of the fields, while the majority remained the workers without great wealth. The non-working wealthy would in turn have the luxury of being able to develop the arts & science in thereby influencing the advancement of the society. Nonetheless, it required violence to maintain this unfair balance of the resources of human society, as naturally the majority did not appreciate the injustice of the imbalance. It didn't take long for agrarian societies to have armies to maintain the peace within the structure of their societies. Religion soon became linked to the very structure of society, reinforcing the violence necessary of the state as well as the differences between groups of people based upon their status. State ideology became imbued with religion, and warfare therefore had a sacred element. Politics and religion were all wrapped up in a society, and this way the society evolved and survived or died.

Armstrong's archaeological evidence of these theories is somewhat scant, I might add, though it does seem to make sense.

All individuals have aggressive "me-first" urges. But for any society to survive these cannot be allowed and violence must subdue them. But religion provides its counter urges of compassion, and self-sacrifice to the welfare of the whole of society. This is then

tied to “the gods” (whatever they may be) as the authority of this social system.

Armstrong declares that most civilizations move along this pathway, that admittedly she totally left out The Native American civilizations and African Societies in her discussions. She claimed that agrarian civilizations also existed to capture more good growing land, requiring warfare. Warfare also united the society within itself to rise to the “necessary” warfare. Other societies survived not on an agrarian basis but on raiding the resources of other agrarian societies. She claimed that the ancient Hebrews were like this. They looked down on the agrarian society’s work and preferred living in towns, studying and trading. Eventually they too came to understand the necessity of agriculture to the survival of society itself.

Armstrong asserts that over history war after war was fought not firstly over a religion. Leaders of societies used religion as a way of focusing on the “us and them” necessary for the participation of the masses into warfare. By making the enemy less than human by sometimes using religious differences, leaders were able to marshal societies into war. She points out that the crusades were started more to enhance the power of Pope Urban the Second over the national kingdoms of Europe than to really conquer the Holy Land. Furthermore, the violence demonstrated by the

Christians actually shocked the far more tolerant Muslims of the age, something we in the West often don't realize. Interestingly, the Inquisition of Spain killed far less people than the 30 years war in Europe, which was essentially about national control of territory more than religion itself. The violent civil war in Lebanon in our time was less about Shii and Sunni and Christian differences, than about the political discrimination by each group against the other, leaving definite have and have-nots in the Lebanese nation.

Modern society since industrialization took on a new turn in the structures of society. In the 1800's a man named John Locke brought new ideas to western societies. Until this time, religion and faith was all about the practice of running societies. They were so intertwined as to be undividable. Even the ultimate leadership of European societies, the king, had a religious as well as secular significance. Locke, along with many contemporaries, believed that religion was becoming a private, internal commitment. It should therefore be separated from politics and people wouldn't fight over their religious beliefs. The church and the state ought to be separated forevermore, and freedom of religion would provide a peace in civilization in Europe. Interestingly Locke believed set of five truths were innate in the human mind: 1. A supreme deity existed, 2, the deity ought to be worshiped, 3. The deity should be served with ethical living and piety, and 4. Humans were called to reject sin, and 5. Humans

would be punished or rewarded by God after death. This took faith out of the structure of society itself, but faith could be used to control the behaviour of the citizens of a society. If the political state was separated from any particular religion, the state itself became the central political structure. Religion became a private search. Locke believed a peaceful society would reign if humans weren't fighting over their religious beliefs, but rather attending their beliefs privately. Secularism was born, and the way was made open to the development of the nation state.

In the European world, and in this I include the colonised European North Americans, states free of religious identity evolved over 200 years. The national identity became the "religion" or belief system of the state. The United Kingdom replaced England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland, Germany replaced many separate states, and Italy was united as late as the 1890's. The French Revolution violently separated the church from the state. National identity became supreme. This was further exacerbated by industrialization and colonisation. The culmination of this major change in society, withdrawing religion from the very structure of the state, eventually ended up NOT in peace, as Locke foretold, but in World War 1!

Colonisation too had a major influence upon civilization. Firstly colonies were founded in "the new world" of North America to increase the wealth of the colonising nation through trade. Trade

led to colonisation of the East Indies, Africa and India. The wealthy “mother country” gained natural resources cheaply for their industries, while in turn the colonies became a market for the industry of the mother country. Industrialisation by mainly Caucasian nations then created a worldwide system of haves and have-nots with the colonies.

The peace agreement at the end of World War 1 meant a re-carving of the Middle based not on ethnicity or religion but rather on geography further complicated our world situation. By creating nations of varying religious beliefs and ethnicity, the result was more haves and have-nots. Colonisation thus created a worldwide society, of haves and have-nots. Given the vast wealth to be found in the Middle East’s greatest natural resource, oil, the temptation to gain personal wealth over national wealth, created more haves and have-nots through corruption.

Unfortunately, Armstrong believes, human society on the ground, hasn’t caught up with the concept of a global society. Groups of people still fall into “us and them” thinking, making differences of colour, belief, cultural practices enough to segregate us. By making “the other” as less than human, by continuing with unfair distribution of resources, by continuation of the domination of some groups over others economically, far too many human societies are dependent upon warfare to settle their differences. I have also

observed that people have begun to look back to “the good old days” for inspiration on how to structure society, but those “good old days” do not offer adequate solutions for our global economic political system.

As Ghandi said, *An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth makes the whole world blind and toothless*. Armstrong believes that now, more than ever, we need to seek the compassionate, empathy spoken of in most religions traditions as a way of thought and action. More than ever we need to understand that we humans are all much the same, and the similarities we share far exceed our differences. Here the more contemplative aspect of the world’s religions offers us a universal attitude of compassion and peace. I might add that even atheistic humanist beliefs offer this.

I don’t know if I believe all of Armstrong’s hypotheses about every society she writes about are all true. I would like to have seen more anthropological research into her assumptions of early civilizations. I also don’t think we *need religion* to be compassionate, loving, forgiving, and equitable. But I do believe Armstrong’s assertion that these qualities are necessary to develop worldwide peace. We must accentuate the global human similarities and interdependence of all societies if we are to avoid blowing each other up in the future.

It also brings me to the conclusion that our 7 Principles are the best, most universal way to start. Were they to become the religious foundation of every society they would not interfere with either ancient religious traditions or modern atheists, but were there a global commitment to our 7 Principles, peace would certainly have a better chance. As my Unitarian bumper sticker states: *create peace, cultivate justice*.

In summary, Armstrong offers the idea that over the centuries of ancient history, in order to inspire citizens to participate in warfare and in domestic violence political leaders manipulated religious ideas and used the differences between groups to inspire war. Since industrialization alongside the rise of the nation state, religious ideas were relegated to being personal beliefs, used more for the control of society than for the purposes of warfare; the nation state became the central influence in political thinking. Colonisation created a global system of haves and have-nots which, to this day, creates discontent and warfare.