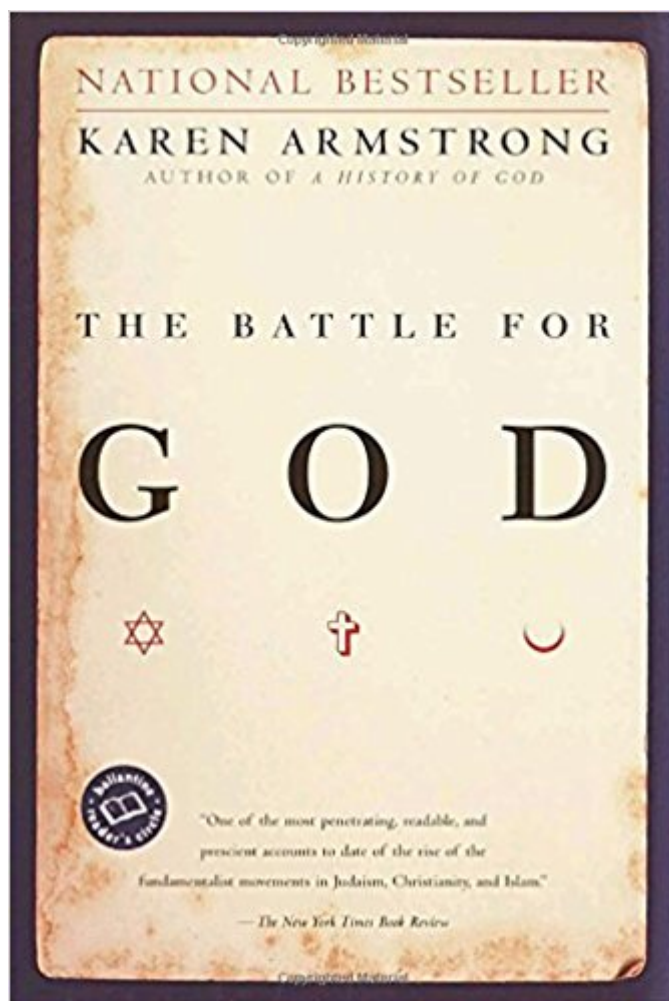


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# The Battle For God



## Synopsis

In our supposedly secular age governed by reason and technology, fundamentalism has emerged as an overwhelming force in every major world religion. Why? This is the fascinating, disturbing question that bestselling author Karen Armstrong addresses in her brilliant new book *The Battle for God*. Writing with the broad perspective and deep understanding of human spirituality that won huge audiences for *A History of God*, Armstrong illuminates the spread of militant piety as a phenomenon peculiar to our moment in history. Contrary to popular belief, fundamentalism is not a throwback to some ancient form of religion but rather a response to the spiritual crisis of the modern world. As Armstrong argues, the collapse of a piety rooted in myth and cult during the Renaissance forced people of faith to grasp for new ways of being religious--and fundamentalism was born. Armstrong focuses here on three fundamentalist movements: Protestant fundamentalism in America, Jewish fundamentalism in Israel, and Islamic fundamentalism in Egypt and Iran--exploring how each has developed its own unique way of combating the assaults of modernity. Blending history, sociology, and spirituality, *The Battle for God* is a compelling and compassionate study of a radical form of religious expression that is critically shaping the course of world history.

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## Customer Reviews

About 40 years ago popular opinion assumed that religion would become a weaker force and people would certainly become less zealous as the world became more modern and morals more

relaxed. But the opposite has proven true, according to theologian and author Karen Armstrong (*A History of God*), who documents how fundamentalism has taken root and grown in many of the world's major religions, such as Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. Even Buddhism, Sikhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism have developed fundamentalist factions. Reacting to a technologically driven world with liberal Western values, fundamentalists have not only increased in numbers, they have become more desperate, claims Armstrong, who points to the Oklahoma City bombing, violent anti-abortion crusades, and the assassination of President Yitzak Rabin as evidence of dangerous extremes. Yet she also acknowledges the irony of how fundamentalism and Western materialism seem to urge each other on to greater excesses. To "prevent an escalation of the conflict, we must try and understand the pain and perception of the other side," she pleads. With her gift for clear, engaging writing and her integrity as a thorough researcher, Armstrong delivers a powerful discussion of a globally heated issue. Part history lesson, part wake-up call, and mostly a plea for healing, Armstrong's writing continues to offer a religious mirror and a cultural vision. --Gail Hudson  
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Former nun and *A History of God* iconoclast Armstrong delves deeply once again into the often violent histories of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, this time exploring the rise of fundamentalist enclaves in all three religions. Armstrong begins her story in an unexpected, though brilliant, fashion, examining how the three faiths coped with the tumultuous changes wrought by Spain's late-15th-century reconquista. She then profiles fundamentalism, which she views as a mostly 20th-century response to the "painful transformation" of modernity. Armstrong traces the birth of fundamentalism among early 20th-century religious Zionists in Israel, biblically literalist American Protestants and Iranian Shiites wary of Westernization. Armstrong sensitively recognizes one of fundamentalism's great ironies: though they ostensibly seek to restore a displaced, mythical spiritual foundation, fundamentalists often re-establish that foundation using profoundly secular, pseudo-scientific means ("creation science" is a prime example). Armstrong is a masterful writer, whose rich knowledge of all three Western traditions informs the entire book, allowing fresh insights and comparisons. Her savvy thesis about modernization, however, could be improved by some attention to gender issues among fundamentalists. The book is also occasionally marred by a condescending tone; Armstrong attacks easy Protestant targets such as Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart (whose name she misspells) and claims that fundamentalists of all stripes have "distorted" and "perverted" their faiths. Despite its underlying polemic, this study of modernity's embattled casualties is a worthy and provocative read. (Mar.) Copyright 2000 Reed

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Interesting information; not entirely accurate. Firstly, current times are not the first time that religion has been through a fundamentalist shift although she reports that it is. Secondly, she takes the word/opinion of other researchers who are prejudiced about the areas they report upon. That makes her book unreliable in the particulars but interesting information in general. Just pay attention to where she is getting the opinions she repeats, especially in the Middle East.

I have been travelling a lot around the world and was very often confronted with different ethical problems and cultures. I have spent my life to find the Spirit of the Soul and I can only agree on everything which is said in this book: The differences of the religions are very big, but every culture has its own Battle for God. You will understand different views of this phenomenon and definitely better understand how different people have different views regarding of god. Brilliantly and enthusiastically written.

Another enlightening book from Karen Armstrong on religion. This one focuses on the emergence in recent years of powerful -- and politically powerful -- fundamentalist trends in the three great monotheistic religions. She presents these not as a reversion to the past, but as an attempt to deal with a frightening modern world. The world is frightening in a philosophical sense, since the interlinked Enlightenment trends of rationalism, devotion to science, and secularism have created what Sartre called "a God-shaped hole" in modern society, without fulfilling the Enlightenment expectation of better people. It is also frightening in political terms: the horrors of the 20th century, the impact of colonialism, and the current power of what is called free market capitalism have left millions of people feeling marginalized, threatened, and without any clear identity. In this context, the emergence of simplistic fundamentalism with clear beliefs and clear directives is not surprising. It has also had a profound political impact, unleashing terrorism for allegedly Islamic ends, pushing the U.S. consensus sharply to the right, and enflaming the Israeli/Palestinian dispute. In all three instances, Armstrong points out, there are massive conflicts within religious groupings as well as between them, so much so that as Armstrong says "Secularists and religious both feel profoundly threatened by one another". and are unable to understand the other side's world view as anything other than derangement. Armstrong raises the question of what is to be done to defuse these conflicts, but does not come up with many helpful answers. Perhaps there are not any

Humanity had about 1 million people on earth when the agriculture revolution started, and had 4 ancient civilizations that dominated humanity 5,000 years ago - Egypt, Sumer, India, and China. India and China had more than 50% of humanity 5,000 years ago, and had more than 50% of humanity 2,500 years ago. The battle of god, at best, focuses on how Egypt and Sumer evolved to Christians and Muslims today, so it addresses about half of humanity. As a result it can not paint a complete picture. However, it is a very useful book that supports the hypothesis that human nature is to pursue extremes if we are let alone (without internal controls). I like the Scopes trial, and the Agudat vs Hasidic Jews as examples of how we can become more extreme.

Karen Armstrong's analysis of fundamentalism in the Abrahamic religions is top notch. I read this book several years ago and purchased this copy for my brother in law who I know will appreciate it.

Armstrong's opening line summarizes the theme of her book. "One of the startling developments of the late 20th century has been the emergence within every major religious tradition of a militant piety known as fundamentalism." She doesn't set off on an attack of religion, but rather explains in her view why this has taken place. In short, her answer is, a reaction to modernity. In part, modernity in terms of excess secular rationalism encroaching on spiritual matters where "analysis" doesn't belong, mostly unintentionally, and even by the pious as influenced by the larger society. The result being a listlessness of civilizations defined by what Nicholas Humphrey ("A History Of The Mind") characterizes as too much perceptual and too little sensory, with little space for the soul. This is not to say she'll fill the pious with joy, after all, she says, "A literal reading of Scripture is a modern preoccupation springing from the prevalence of rational over mythical interpretation." Such interpretations then force a militant stance on Scriptural literalism in the face of criticism revealing Scriptures laced with contradictions (when read literally). Students of civilizations will find thrilling Armstrong's notion we are in a 2nd Axial Age. All over the globe people are struggling with new conditions, says Armstrong, forced to reassess their religious traditions designed for entirely different types of societies. That is, for agricultural, not urban societies. She argues the first Axial Age (700BCE - 200BCE) was similarly transitional. At least in the manner of accumulating stress over thousands of years of social, cultural and economic change, all beginning with Sumer and its invention of the city (the wheel, writing, etc.). Compare thousands of years of accumulating change to the upheavals now witnessed where whole civilizations rise, globalize, and fall in 72 years (USSR). Technology, with almost no idea of what problems it will breed, and these fiercely dislocating financial machinations are too rapid for humans well suited for hunter gatherer groups of

25 individuals (as Richard Leakey claims), not a planet crammed with 7 billion of us. Armstrong notes that change at a slower pace, or none at all for generations, was once addressed by religion born from and suited for that era without the challenge of scientific criticism and such a fierce pace of technological pressure. While some have tried to withdraw from the secular world (not unlike that classic example of the Essenes), she says, there's no getting away from it. Armstrong chronicles a list of offenses, response and counter response over the last 400 years for all three Levantine religions. Unlike countermeasures in weaponry, reaction of the social organism takes much longer - generally on the order of at least a half century or more. Such spans seem to be required before populations are able to realize their condition, articulate and maneuver in any meaningful way. The 1926 Skopes trial and America's fundamentalist response begun in the 1970's is presented as one example. A fundamentalism Armstrong observes has nothing to do with earlier forms of religious faith, but is rather a new form in which modern science-like interpretations of religion (otherwise known as Creationism) are used to counter modern science-like criticisms of religion. Armstrong seems to have heard of neither Marcel Gauchet ("Disenchantment Of The World") or Joseph Campbell, who both shed added light on this subject with more on political and mythological aspects respectively. Armstrong not infrequently conflates any form of human hostility since the 16th century with rational modernity. Ethnic cleansing, aggressive force, and abuse of power are hardly new to our world, though one might argue we are provided another avenue over which humans can practice these favored pastimes. Similarly a scent of our Postmodernist fashion occasionally rises from her pages in the usual manner of vilifying the West while lauding other groups for precisely the same acts. "Establishment" of three Islamic Empires (Ottoman, Safavid, Moghul) were to Armstrong "exciting and innovative", not "violent and imperialistic". A generally fine book, occasionally tedious with repeated use of Arabic or Hebrew terminology, and finally a reasoned explanation for the secular among us who view fundamentalist forms of pious behavior as so odd. An excellent text for scientist Michael Dawkins and comedian Bill Maher offering them an opportunity to lose some of that smugness.

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