



The Battle for God

By Karen Armstrong

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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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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

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*

From Publishers Weekly

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.)

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From Library Journal

Armstrong, author of *A History of God* and other books on the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim religions, writes very perceptively about the intense fear of modernity that has stimulated various fundamentalisms: Protestant, in the United States; Jewish, in Israel; Sunni Muslim, in Egypt; and Shii Muslim, in Iran. Each is ultimately modern in its attempts at converting mythic thinking into logical thinking and in its use of widespread literacy and the democratic ideas about individual importance that modernity fostered, but each is also at war with its liberal co-religionists and with secularists who "have entirely different conceptions of

the sacred." Armstrong concludes that both sides--fundamentalists and secularists (including governments)--need compassion in order to be true to their own religious or humanistic values. The historical range and depth of this work, which transcends other treatments of the subject, make this highly recommended for all libraries.

---Carolyn M. Craft, Longwood Coll., Farmville, VA
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Users Review

From reader reviews:

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