

The Battle for God, by Karen Armstrong

by [Bruce B. Lawrence](#) in the [September 27, 2000](#) issue

The God of Abraham is the God of vengeance and wrath who will consume the world because it has neglected him. The world has become modern and secular, material and political, pluralist and multicultural. It has forsaken the old ways. It is doomed to perdition. So believe the fundamentalists about whom Karen Armstrong writes. She is, of course, using the term in a specific, limited way, unlike the Anglican prelate John Stott, who once noted that "every Christian is a fundamentalist." He might have added: "Every Jew and Muslim, every Sikh and Parsee, every person who identifies herself or himself as a monotheist, that is to say, every follower of Abraham--is a fundamentalist, at least to the extent that she holds certain myths to be true, and bases her life on these 'fundamentals.'"

It was certain nonreligious developments that turned believers in the God of Abraham into religious ideologues opposed to the antireligious worldview of modernists. These developments include, but are not limited to, the rise of industrial capitalism; the colonial expansion of Europe; the emergence of the modern nation-state; and the catastrophic effects of two world wars, followed by the cold war and many "lesser" wars.

For Armstrong the nonreligious developments scarcely matter. The first part of her book covers a huge swath of time, from the late 15th to the late 19th century. It analyzes Jews, Muslims and Christians as discrete religious communities, each following Abraham in its own fashion. Armstrong makes sweeping generalizations insipidly culled from secondary sources. Her main thesis is that the New World did not accommodate the old, that true believers, whether Jewish, Christian or Muslim, were alienated by the godlessness of modernization, even though it was not till roughly 1870 that the emptiness, uncertainty and terror of modern culture spawned in all three of the monotheistic faiths what we now call fundamentalist movements. Each of these movements charted a way to rescue mythos from logos.

Mythos and logos form the binary base for Armstrong's explanation not only of the emergence of the modern world but also of the fierce response by fundamentalists to its excesses. It was the modernist preference for logos over mythos that led

fundamentalists to battle for God against modernist godlessness. Mythos, according to Armstrong, was the dominant worldview of premodern folk: "They were less concerned than we are with what actually happened, but more concerned with the meaning of an event." They also prized logos, recognizing that "unlike myth, logos must relate exactly to facts and correspond to external realities if it is to be effective." But in the modern (post-1870) world, logos preempted mythos. It was then that "the people of Europe and America achieved such astonishing success in science and technology that they began to think that logos was the only means to truth and began to discount mythos as false and superstitious."

Armstrong then charts the stages of the fundamentalist counternarrative to the modernist trunk narrative. From 1870 to 1900 the battle lines are drawn. From 1900 to 1925 the fundamentals are spelled out. From 1925 to 1960 a counterculture emerges. From 1960 to 1974 groups are mobilized to oppose the dominant culture. From 1974 to 1979 the offensive is launched. Then in the last two decades of the century fundamentalists seem doomed to defeat, though as the new millennium dawns they are far from eradicated or relegated to the dustbin of history.

Does the chronology sound too pat, even formulaic? It is. Armstrong parodies the battle imagery of fundamentalists as the pattern for their coalescence, resistance, attack and near defeat. Her scheme works only because she limits herself to four groups: American Protestant patriots, religious Zionists in Israel, and Islamists in Egypt and Iran. Rifts within these groups as well as links between them and developments beyond them are all ignored. Hers is a Procrustean mode of inquiry, cutting and pasting together disparate groups into a narrative that has no rough edges, no loose threads, no alternate outcomes.

This is the 12th book by Armstrong, an ex-nun turned religious commentator. It bears comparison with her 1993 best seller, *A History of God: The 4,000 Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, but with a major difference. Her latent Catholic spirituality informed *A History of God*, especially the middle chapters on the God of the philosophers and the God of the mystics. No Catholic voice can be heard in the boilerplate, often plodding prose of *The Battle for God*. In *A History of God* fundamentalists are depicted as exponents of "bad" religion. Christian fundamentalists, Armstrong observed then, "seem to have little regard for the loving compassion of Christ"--i.e., they neglect the true God of Abraham. Indeed, she goes so far as to condemn fundamentalist religiosity as "actually a retreat from God. To make such human, historical phenomena as Christian 'Family Values,' 'Islam,' or 'the

Holy Land' the focus of religious devotion is a new form of idolatry. . . . It must be rejected as inauthentic."

Far from repeating such judgments in *The Battle for God*, Armstrong tilts to the other side. While criticizing fundamentalist ideology as totalitarian, she applauds fundamentalist correctives to modernist excesses. "This battle for God was an attempt to fill the void at the heart of a society based on scientific rationalism. Instead of reviling fundamentalists, the secularist establishment could sometimes have benefitted from a long, hard look at some of their countercultures." And when they created their alternative societies, "fundamentalists were demonstrating their disillusion with a culture which could not easily accommodate the spiritual."

Her special pleading for a corrective to secularist dispositions and tactics is reminiscent of Stephen Carter's *The Culture of Disbelief*. Carter's 1993 jeremiad painted American society as flawed, above all because the dominant culture is secular liberalism, a culture of disbelief which trivializes religion instead of according it its rightful place of honor in public life. Carter's range of evidence was more narrow, and his approach jurisprudential, but the premise of his argument was identical to Armstrong's: the only pathway to a battle beyond God is to embrace a public stance that affirms religious sensibilities even while protecting nonbelievers from the assault of religious extremism.

Many who praise the God of Abraham from different pews (or prayer mats) will wonder what message Armstrong's book has for them. The major, unanswered question is: How can a moral community that exhorts citizens to the virtuous life appeal to an inclusive God? Will not monotheists always clash among themselves? Is not the transcendent good finally a safer ground for public advocacy than the transcendent God, who must always be some community's God and not the God of all?