

KAREN ARMSTRONG
BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF A HISTORY OF GOD



HOLY WAR

THE CRUSADES AND THEIR
IMPACT ON TODAY'S WORLD

"A tour de force. . . Any reader will come away
from this book with a better frame of reference for assessing
today's headlines." —The Kansas City Star

WITH A NEW PREFACE

Holy War: The Crusades and Their Impact on Today's World

Karen Armstrong

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Holy War: The Crusades and Their Impact on Today's World Karen Armstrong

Karen Armstrong, bestselling author of **A History of God**, skillfully narrates this history of the Crusades with a view toward their profound and continuing influence.

In 1095 Pope Urban II summoned Christian warriors to take up the cross and reconquer the Holy Land. Thus began the holy wars that would focus the power of Europe against a common enemy and become the stuff of romantic legend. In reality the Crusades were a series of rabidly savage conflicts in the name of piety. And, as Armstrong demonstrates in this fascinating book, their legacy of religious violence continues today in the Middle East, where the age-old conflict of Christians, Jews, and Muslims persists.

Holy War: The Crusades and Their Impact on Today's World Details

Date : Published November 27th 2001 by Anchor (first published 1988)

ISBN : 9780385721400

Author : Karen Armstrong

Format : Paperback 672 pages

Genre : History, Religion, Nonfiction, Islam, War

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From Reader Review Holy War: The Crusades and Their Impact on Today's World for online ebook

Adam says

From Library Journal

Recent historians have convincingly demonstrated that 13th-century European governments institutionalized three forms of irrational bigotry that have tragically affected the modern world: anti-Semitism, anti-homosexuality, and anti-Islam. This important book, which brings the perspective of a student of theology and literature who also knows traditional political history, sees the medieval Crusades as the root of current Middle East conflicts. Such a view substantiates the historical interpretation. The book attempts a "triple vision" of the concept of crusade or holy war for Jews, Christians, and Muslims, tracing the religious origins of conflict among the three peoples to their differing interpretations of scripture, the secular origins to 19th-century nationalism and imperialism. The result is an erudite, balanced, and lucidly written study which shows that false images, ridiculous perceptions, and absurd demons have haunted all three peoples. A mine of useful information on Muslim-Western perceptions of each other, this book for the general reader can be beneficially read by scholars and Middle Eastern experts.

-Bennett D. Hill, Georgetown Univ., Washington, D.C.

Lindsey Reyes says

While Armstrong openly admits that she is not to be studied as she is a mere armchair historian who actually studied religion and literature, she makes a point of making multiple judgments and predictions without bringing up sufficient supporting evidence. Reading what little I did was pure torture and I doubt I could ever finish this book!

Dianna says

I knew very little about the Islamic beliefs or beginnings before reading this book - I'm impressed. Although Karen can get a bit tedious (repetitious at best) she provides a wealth of I believe unbiased information. I'll have to admit though that I forced myself to finish the last 150 pages, but I'm not a quitter and always afraid I might miss something important. I think she could have said all she needed to say in probably 400 words or less and it would have been more interesting.

H Wesselius says

Although I'm a big fan of her *The History of God*, this earlier work was not as impressive. Armstrong correctly identifies the tendency to holy war in certain strands of Judaism and Christianity but doesn't see this point in Islam until the post WWII era in which case she blames the West and the establishment of Israel. She denies Islam the ability to take responsibility and in that way she is patronizing. Her more lenient take on Islam stems from her taking Mohammad's words at face value. However, this is inconsistent since she would then have to take Jesus' words at face value and thus it too would be a religion of peace. She fails to judge Islam in its more mature institutionalized and solidified form. Thus Pope Urban II is compared

morally to Mohammend, more accurately he should be compared to the corrupted bloated immans who cooperated with the Ottoman Turks or the earlier Abbasids and Umayyad regimes. In any situation where a group deem themselves to hold an exclusivity to truth, holy war is a possible. More interesting is the tantalizing few times she draws out the connection between holy war and a desire for the end of times; an occurrence that occurs in all three variants of monotheism. An other irritants -- her support for the "beauty of the Koran" thesis. The beauty of the Koran is often cited as proof of its truthfulness but analogous to this in English would allow us to promote Shakespeare as a prophet. Finally, positing motivation to historical actors is difficult and even more difficult is ascribing motivation to entire movements and cultures. As a religious scholar she naturally favors spiritual-type explanations but she shouldn't neglect reasons of power, curiosity, and greed. Despite my criticism its still worth a read. As I'm currently reading Armstrong's History of Islam I can report she becomes more critical.

Alan says

Armstrong displays little knowledge or concern about the intricacies of a complex series of medieval wars - if the Crusades can even be considered wars in today's sense. Instead, she crafted a book that confirms the modern view of crazy religious warriors driven by fear, hate and ignorance. Maybe I am simplifying Armstrong too much, so I will cite specific problems with this book. First, the role of the Byzantines are their recent losses to the Turks are barely explained and the Battle of Manzikert is not even mentioned. Also, she seems uncomfortable with the idea of the Crusades as a response to two centuries of Arab conquests because the Islamic expansion had largely ceased for over a century before the Crusades. However, she later argues that the Crusades deeply impacted the Middle East and continue to affect the West's relation with the Islamic world. One can't have it both ways. The Islamic conquests cannot become a distant, irrelevant memory in two centuries while the Crusades continue to reverberate after eight hundred years. Furthermore, she speculates that non-Muslims were probably "grateful" to be conquered by the Arabs. Whatever she's doing, it is not history, it's political (or politically correct). Read Runciman, Asbridge, Tyreman and Madden. Each one has a slightly different view of causation and motivation, without oversimplification.

In her favor, she is a talented writer and can be quite readable when not taken alongside historians who focus on the Crusades.

Rod Van Meter says

This book deserves a longer, more thoughtful review than I have time for this morning, but this will have to do for now.

I love her attempt to create "triple vision", an understanding of the point of view of the Jews, Christians and Muslims concerning the Middle East. That was more than I had bargained for when I picked up the book. I much of the text, Islam seems to get the benefit of the doubt more than the other two.

The book was written in about 1989, and much has happened since then, but it gives a great basis for understanding later events.

She alternates chapters on the Crusades themselves with chapters on the development of the modern Middle East, focusing on British Zionism of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

I wasn't aware of the extent to which the idea of a Jewish state in Palestine was supported by, even crested

by, non-Jews, at least partly out of their own prejudices.

I found the chapters on the Crusades better written, clearer, more engaging, and perhaps less sordid (despite the many intrigues and atrocities). The modern chapters seem to assume a working knowledge of important modern figures that not everyone will have. They also read, in places, more like a thesis than a book. I would guess they were written first, and her skill as a writer grew over time.

It is a dense book, and it took me over three months to finish, reading several other books in the meantime.

As with anything this political, I would assume that there are contrasting opinions, which I haven't yet looked for. But I suspect my own opinions would align largely with Armstrong's, as I am always searching to understand how others see things.

Recommended.

Lucy says

I cannot help but agree with much of what Armstrong theorizes and would recommend this book to anyone who wants a better understanding of the historical roots of some of the modern conflicts in this area. In the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries, European Christendom was stumbling and Muslim power was at its impressive height: Christian insecurity and fear of the East (exemplified by the slaughter of European Jews and distrust of Byzantine Christians), more than anything, prompted the Crusades. The effect of the Crusades on the Muslim AND Arab mentality was a pulling in and isolationist movement throughout the Muslim world that broke down the power, wealth, learning, acceptance, and openmindedness that had so characterized the empire while the Dark Ages (illiteracy, disease, hunger, etc.) were ravaging Europe. Armstrong explores little-understood and long-held insecurities on both the West and the Middle East's parts toward each other in the face of today's conflicts.

Elizabeth Sulzby says

Begun in May 2010 and still reading. Former nun and believer, Armstrong brings very new information in the history of Xity, Xian theology, Roman Catholicism and its history, Islam and its history, Judiasm and its history. She writes respectfully and critically about each religion. She shows how each of these developments have been "read back into" Old Testament and New Testaments canons; and, in an oversimplification, how each of these feeds into the current post 9-11 period. I think I am taking so long reading it because it leads me off into other books and articles, google searches, etc., that are related. A problem I have is if a history is written from a "Christian" point of view, one has to try to figure out what that history includes if one doesn't take that "Christian" point of view. A simple example is what one takes from the use of B.C./A.D. and BCE/CE. This is a very complex book but Armstrong presents her thinking very clearly.

Peter Fogtdal says

If all scholars wrote as well as Karen Armstrong, the world of letters would be a better place. Karen

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Graham says

I came to this book with an idea of the crusades that pivoted on good king Arthur as told by a Disney fox version of Robin Hood. I found the book hugely enlightening and it has helped me along my journey to better understanding just how complex our history is and how little I should trust what I was told as a child (or adult really).

Without any second references, I finished the book suspicious that the author is promoting a sense of western guilt in the undercurrent of good history story telling. I liked the multi pronged approach to story telling. I liked thinking I was getting into the heads of each side. I learned a lot. But I came away feeling like the conclusion is that the middle east would be a wonderful place if not for those pesky crusaders. The authors tries to argue that religious zeal played a new and game changing part in the conflict, and mostly had me convinced. Having digested the book a little, I think this a little more tenuous. As another reviewer noted, the Muslim army had relatively recently swept around the Mediterranean and threatened all of the western way. And others did the same before and since. That popes where now pulling the strings seems inconsequential.

Dispute the above. I will recommend this read to anyone. the extent of Christian extremism at the time is my main take away from this book. And how religious zeal lead a few to make such disastrous decisions that lead to so many deaths, often without even finding an enemy.

The book is not a quick read, some of it is laborious, but then some of it flows quite well. By the end, I could not put it down.

Tim says

If it's true that there's never objectivity in the telling of history, then perhaps the primary goal in the reading of it is to gain an insight into different viewpoints in the pursuit of empathy. If it's also true that we all participate in history in the sense that it shapes our present then this pursuit of empathy becomes even more important when deep-rooted religious narratives are involved that all insist on their mutually exclusive interpretations of divine intervention. Further, when times of intense religious conflict arise, as during the Crusades, and as during our own time, new myths are fused with the old ones – even the foundational ones – to create ever more impenetrable narratives of division.

As a self-declared “independent monotheist”, Armstrong is uniquely suited for the telling of this history. She describes her ecumenical perspective as “triple vision”, which is the departure point for all of her work. This triple vision is none other than a non-dualistic outlook based on the transcendent unity that it as the heart of all three monotheisms. In this book, she takes us through the events and personalities that comprise the history of Mid-East conflict from Richard the Lionheart and Saladin to Sharon and Arafat. Through all of this storytelling, Armstrong has a predominant theme: the myths of religion touch the deepest reality, the deepest truth, the only truth, but these truths have a transcendent reality that becomes dangerous and deadly when forced into only one form or interpretation. This insistence of only one interpretation takes away the transcendent beauty and allows for its opposite to manifest in the form of control, power, manipulation and underlying agendas on every side.

It is because of the particular respect I have for a writer like Armstrong that allowed a book like this to have such an impact. I found myself being placed behind the eyes of the Muslim defenders of Jerusalem, but also behind the eyes of the Zionists of the 1800s and seeing both as humans with particular narratives, particular histories, particular beliefs. Simply put, she's a master at giving equal time to all sides. She's almost obsessive about it. To Armstrong, humanity is not only central to religious truth, but absolutely critical for peace in the Mid-East: "*One does not make peace except with enemies and one does not make peace with enemies who are despised or who are conceived of as inhuman monsters.*" (142-143).

Megan says

Fantastic look at the Crusades and all the major players. Though it's a substantial read and can be confusing, particularly for those unfamiliar with the structure and meaning of Arabic names, this book is well worth the effort. Though Armstrong rarely explicitly says it, there are many parallels between the Christian European reaction of the Crusades (religious extremism by anyone's definition!) to the "occupation" of Jerusalem, and the current conflict going on around the world. This book will present a new prism through which to see the news every night. I would recommend tackling Armstrong's book on Islam prior to reading this for those with no background in the Middle East or Islam. It's a much shorter book and a fast read.
