



Guilty: religion does cause wars

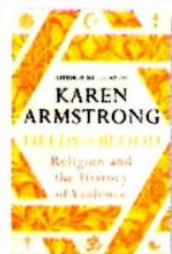
Karen Armstrong makes the improbable claim that belief is rarely behind violence. David Aaronovitch is left unconverted

Karen Armstrong's latest book is a 400-page and 1,470 footnote-long argument with London cab drivers about religion. They, along with American commentators, psychiatrists and Oxford academics have in Armstrong's hearing, "recited like a mantra", the phrase "Religion has been the cause of all major wars in history." The result of such an expression has been to "load the violent sins of the 20th century on to the back of 'religion' and drive it out into the political wilderness." Religion has become, she argues, "a scapegoat".


It is a shame that so much effort has had to be expended on such an easily falsifiable premise. If I were to ask my children — all of whom have studied 20th-century history in the 21st century — to account for the violence of that period and to assign responsibility I am reasonably certain that they would mention Hitler and Stalin, fascism, nationalism and communism, but not the Pope, the Mahatma or the Rev Martin Luther King. But it is true that cabbies and dons do sometimes say these things without thinking them through and so Armstrong, a former Roman Catholic nun, has written a heavy book to be dropped, from a great height, to crack this anti-religious nut.

But Armstrong's argument, distilled, actually goes further than denying that religion is the cause of all major wars. Her view is that it is the cause of no major wars at all and — properly understood — of almost no violence whatsoever. Whenever, to an untrained eye, it looks like religion might be in the frame for a conflict or a blood-letting, Armstrong deploys her evidence across the aeons (the book proper begins with the Sumerians of Uruk some 5,000 years ago) to show that it wasn't.

In large part this is an irritating definitional argument, derived from the work of an American theologian, William T Cavanaugh. In 2009 Cavanaugh published *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict*, which said that what we call "reli-



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**The
Inquisition,
she says, was
caused by
financial
jealousy as
much as
religion**

gion" is and was inseparable from the secular world. So, when you think something is religion, actually it's politics or economics. Furthermore, trying to make out that there's something separate called religion is just a way the modern, liberal nation state has of asserting its dominant values.

To a Marxist brought up during the discussions of the Sixties and Seventies, this contention has a familiar, leaden ring to it. It is both reductionist and determinist. The old, crude base and superstructure model was held to suggest that economics and class position (ie, power) determined all else. In that way religion, like relations between the sexes, literature or art, was a function of where we had got to in the material world. When it was time for feudal society to supercede slavery we got Christianity, when capitalism needed to take over we got Protestantism. I once met a young gay Stalinist who thought that under socialism he'd be straight.

But the problem with this model was that though it told you something, it didn't tell you everything. It was clear that the world of ideas ("ideology") had autonomy. People would do things, terrible or amazing things, that had nothing to do with class relations or the stages of history, but because they believed something.

I will skip over Armstrong's now obligatory use of cod neuroscience to boost her case, as I will vault over the Assyrians, the Aryans and the early civilisations of the Indus delta. I'll pause a moment, however, to reject Armstrong's further attempt to define her way to freedom by suggesting that "violence" means the "subtle violence" of any system of inequality. If nothing is religion and everything is violence, then yes, we can't usefully say that religion sometimes causes violence. And we didn't need 400 pages to tell us.

Yet we have them. And after a while — for all their apparent erudition — they begin to read like the improbable words of a desperate counsel, wig askew, cobbling together the best defence she can for the tattooed bruiser in the dock.

Take this, on the persecution and expulsion of the Jews from Spain in the late 15th century, the forcible conversion of those who stayed and the later hounding and execution of hundreds (perhaps thousands) of those *conversos* by the Inquisition. The Reyes Catolicos (Catholic Monarchs) Ferdinand and Isabella had petitioned the Pope to be allowed to begin an Inquisition in Spain to deal with Jewish influence. But according to Armstrong they "were not personally anti-Semitic, but simply wanted to pacify their kingdom". So why did pacification need to take this denominational form? It was, says Armstrong "caused by financial and social jealousy as much as religious allegiance". She goes on, "the Spanish Inquisition has become a by-word for fanatical 'religious' intolerance, but its violence was caused less by theological than political considerations."

Were there no rich Christians to be jealous of? Why "politically" pick on the Jews, force them to convert and then become paranoid about the authenticity of their conversions? As I was writing this review a book arrived from Penguin: *The Life and Passion of William of Norwich*, written by a monk called Thomas of Monmouth. It is the story of a young boy whose death in 1144 was blamed on the Jews. The principal accuser was the monk Thomas. This was the first "blood libel" against Jews, claiming that they used Christian blood in their rituals. The first of many.

Thomas's loathing of the Jews had nothing to do with money or power. To him the Jews were suspect because they were not Christians — they did not believe. His reasons for inciting violence were religious. The motives of the Spanish Inquisition — what they believed — were religious. On 9/11 Mohammed Atta thought he was headed for Paradise not Bondi.

Armstrong may assert that jihadis are "chiefly motivated by the desire to escape a stifling sense of insignificance and pointlessness in secular nation states that struggle to absorb foreign minorities", but not one of them has ever said so. After all, they could have achieved all that by going on *X Factor*, like the non-religious and the children of taxi drivers do. And no one would have died.