

By Faith L. Justice

The Fundamentalist Battle for God

An interview with Karen Armstrong, who explains what happens when tradition clashes with change

Karen Armstrong calls herself a "free-lance monotheist" and has the credentials to back it up. A former Catholic nun, she now teaches at the Leo Baeck College for the Study of Judaism in London. In 1999, the Muslim Public Affairs Council honored her with its Media Award. Whatever drew Armstrong to the religious life still kindles her passions. "I never married," Armstrong says. "I live alone, and how do I spend my time? I write, think, and talk about God."

Armstrong writes accessible books that untangle the knots of intractable problems, including Middle East peace and the rise of fundamentalism. She's written more than twelve books, among them the best-selling *A History of God: The 4,000 Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (1993); *Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths* (1996); *The Battle for God* (2000); and *Islam, A Short History* (2000). When not signing books, lecturing, or appearing on television, she lives and writes in London.

CATHOLIC DIGEST

Could you define fundamentalism and outline its roots?

Fundamentalism is a reaction to the rational, secular ethos of modern society. During the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries, the West developed a civilization without precedent in the world. Instead of being based economically on the surplus of agriculture, as all premodern societies had been, this new world was based on technology that could be replicated. Science achieved such spectacular results that the old mythical way of looking at religion became entirely discredited. In modern times, in the West, people became extremely concerned that the truth of religion be historically demonstrable and scientifically verifiable, or it couldn't be valid. Once, myth had been discredited, religion had to be rethought.

As modernity becomes established, a fundamentalist movement usually grows alongside it. Fundamentalists feel profoundly threatened by modern society. Every movement I've studied is convinced that the liberal, secular movement wants to wipe it out. As a result, fundamentalists tend to withdraw

Fundamentalists feel profoundly threatened by modern society. Every movement I've studied is convinced that the liberal, secular movement wants to wipe it out.

from society, create a counterculture — a sort of sacred enclave of

pure faith — where they can gather strength. Eventually, they make a counteroffensive, an attack to challenge the domination of secular modernity and to reasacralize the world. They fight a battle for God.

Why would the fundamentalists believe that the liberal, secular movement wants to wipe them out?

Each fundamentalism I studied began with an assault by the secularist establishment, or so-called liberal establishment. These attacks simply drive fundamentalists to greater extremity, like what happened at Waco, Texas. The federal troops did not understand the Waco community and behaved ineptly, and the Waco community did not know how to communicate with the secular world. There was a clash followed by calamity.

The worst kind of Islamic Sunni fundamentalism developed in the concentration camps into which President Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt interned members of the Muslim Brotherhood, often for doing nothing more than handling

out leaflets or attending a meeting. The Shah of Iran had soldiers go through the streets and, with their bayonets, take the veils off women and rip them. In 1935, his soldiers killed hundreds of people peacefully protesting the secular dress laws. In this kind of atmosphere, it is not surprising that religious people experience secularism not as benign, but as an assault.

Does fundamentalism always lead to violence or war?

No, fundamentalists most often turn to violence in a society already at war or in conflict. In the relatively peaceful United States, most fundamentalist leaders exhort their followers to become politically active — to vote and stand for office.

It's much different in the Middle East where a religious element entered an already existing conflict. Since 1966, two wars have been fought. The first is between the Palestinians and the Israelis. The other — as the murder of President Anwar Sadat of Egypt by Egyptian Muslims and the murder of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin of Israel by an Israeli Jew showed — is between the religious and the secularists within the cultures. To

bring peace to the region will take a long time, but you have to keep going until people decide that war, hatred, and young people dying are not worth it. We've got a long way to go — these people have made war for 60 years and it might take another 60 before they can settle their differences.

Are some religions more prone to fundamentalism?

Fundamentalism exists in every major faith. It started in the United States with Protestant fundamentalists protesting the rapid secularization of the U.S. culture. Modern secular culture was transplanted to other countries through colonization. The first non-Westerners to experience this were Muslims, who bore the brunt of the dominance of western capitalism.

In building our society over three centuries, the West experienced revolution, practiced ethnic cleansing of native peoples, exploited the poor and women and children in factories, despoiled the countryside and produced urban slums. Now we're watching the same process in the Middle East, but worse, because they have to do it much quicker than we did.

What was difficult for us is just as difficult for others and has spawned fundamentalist movements in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Confucianism. This is not just a peculiar response in a few quarters of the world.

Are there Catholic fundamentalists?

There are conservative Catholics who were leaders in the American Moral Majority, and Catholics continue to be active in the New Christian Right. But not every traditional or conservative person is a fundamentalist. What characterizes fundamentalists is the embattled sense and the determination to fight on behalf of the divine. They want to bring God off the sidelines to which God has been relegated in modern secular society, and that requires action.

Do Islam, Judaism, and Christianity express their fundamentalisms differently?

If you think of each movement as going back to the "fundamentals," they have different ways of apprehending the divine. One of the chief ways Christians do it is by formulating doctrine. Modern

Christian fundamentalists express this concern in such debates as how Darwin's theory of evolution conflicts with Genesis.

Christianity is a religion of "right doctrine" — *orthodoxy* — where Judaism and Islam are both religions of "right practice" — *orthopraxy*. Their traditions are about living in a certain way, and in that way you apprehend the divine. In Judaism you can, within reason, believe anything you want about God, but what you *must* do is observe the Torah, the Laws of Moses. Jews have many arguments about the Torah, just as Christians have doctrinal debates, but by living a certain way, observing dietary and dress restrictions, Jews believe they develop an attitude that makes them receptive to the divine.

Islam is in that system, too. The Koran says a Muslim's first duty is to build a just world where the poor and vulnerable are treated with respect. Muslims must make the effort — or *jihad* — to lay aside their own selfishness in this world and recognize the needs of the poor, elderly, and sick and give them a priority over their own needs and selfish wants.

The Koran says aggression is evil. What it does allow is a just war to preserve community values, just as it

was necessary to fight Hitler in World War II.

So jihad doesn't mean holy-war? Jihad means struggle or effort.

The Koran says aggression is evil. What it does allow is a just war to preserve community values, just as it was necessary to fight Hitler in World War II. The permission for war is very carefully hedged with the admonition that you must make peace as soon as the enemy offers and withdraw troops as soon as possible to bring peace back. The Prophet Mohammed, in a very important teaching, said, "I am going home from the battle with my brothers. We are leaving the lesser jihad — the warfare — to return to the greater jihad — the struggle to implement the ideas of the Koran in our own society and our own hearts." Personal effort or struggle is the greater jihad. Warfare is the lesser jihad in which you might have to engage in this flawed, tragic world.

What's the future of fundamentalists?

Unfortunately, fundamentalists and secularists live in two different worlds. "Getting to know one another" does not bring them closer to understanding because they have diametrically opposed ideas.

The Salman Rushdie affair, for example, was a

clash of two competing ideologies that were irreconcilable. One saw the sovereignty of God as essential and could not, therefore, tolerate blasphemy. The other saw freedom of expression as the sacred value. The two could not see the same point of view, couldn't find a bridge to speak to one another. They just reviled each other.

We seem trapped in an escalating spiral of hostility and recrimination. You can't get an arbitrator in and sort things out because hurt feelings and prejudices and sacred values have been trampled by both sides. There's a residue of hurt. In any peace process, you have to get the participants to come to the table, and I don't think we're nearly ready for dialogue. Someone has got to listen to the profound fears and terrors that fundamentalists express.

They often don't express it very coherently, but then we know in our own lives, when we're frightened, we find it difficult to express our fears rationally. It's no use telling people to pull themselves together, be more rational,

Someone has got to listen to the profound fears and terrors that fundamentalists express. It's no use telling people to pull themselves together, be more rational, and face facts. It doesn't work.

Like that, we get on with life, and face facts. It doesn't work.

But any religious practice or belief looks and sounds bizarre to an outsider. Why do Catholics dip their fingers in water and spit of slap this water around their bodies? It

sounds insane unless you know about the Cross and understand the roots of the emotion. The practice addresses. Similarly, I'm trying to show the roots of fundamentalist movements and what they are trying to say.

You can obtain the books by Karen Armstrong mentioned in this article by visiting us online at catholicbookshelf.org/cdbooks.