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SUNDAY BOOK REVIEW

# 'The Norton Anthology of World Religions: Volume II'

By KAREN ARMSTRONG DEC. 19, 2014

At a time when religious faith is coming under intense scrutiny, "The Norton Anthology of World Religions" is presenting a documentary history of six major faiths with sufficient editorial explanation to make their major texts intelligible across the barriers of time and space. This second volume in the series is a textual overview of the three monotheisms — Judaism, Christianity and Islam — from the early scriptures to contemporary writings. It is presented as a journey of exploration, but any reader who hopes to emerge from this literary excursion with a clear-cut understanding of these religions will be disappointed — and that is the great strength of this book.

First, the selected Jewish writings show that contrary to some popular assumptions, religion does not offer unsustainable certainty. The biblical story of the binding of Isaac leaves us with hard questions about Abraham's God, and later, when Moses asks this baffling deity for his name, he simply answers: "Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh", which can be roughly translated: "Never mind who I am!" The Book of Job finds no answer to the problem of human suffering, and Ecclesiastes dismisses human life as "utter futility." This bleak honesty finds its ultimate expression in Elie Wiesel's proclamation of the death of God in Auschwitz.

At its best, religion helps people to live creatively and kindly with the

inescapable sorrow and perplexity of human existence. Jack Miles, the general editor of the series, compares faith to the human propensity to “play,” a disciplined make-believe that leads to *ekstasis*, a “stepping outside” of normal perception, which, when translated into action, has also helped to develop law, commerce, art and science. Today, believers and nonbelievers alike tend to read Scripture with a dogged literalness, but in the premodern period traditional exegesis in all three monotheisms was a form of intense creativity.

Thus the Talmudic rabbis developed an inventive form of exegesis that they called midrash (from *darash*: “to investigate”). They imagined Moses returning to earth in the second century A.D. as a yeshiva boy and, to his consternation, finding that he could not understand a word of Rabbi Akiba’s explication of his own Torah: “Matters that had not been disclosed to Moses were disclosed to Rabbi Akiba and his colleagues.” Sinai had been just the beginning. Revelation was an ongoing process and would continue every time a Jew confronted the sacred text; it was the responsibility of each generation to continue the process.

Scripture did not, therefore, imprison the faithful in outmoded habits of thought. In his selection of Christian texts, Lawrence S. Cunningham hints that some of the Gospel stories may also be a form of inventive midrash that drew on texts from the Hebrew Bible, but unfortunately he does not spell this out clearly to the reader. To counter our modern literalistic mind-set, it would have been helpful if he had also included Origen’s ruling that it was impossible to revere the Bible unless it was interpreted figuratively, and Augustine’s insistence that if the plain meaning of Scripture clashed with reliable scientific discovery, the interpreter must respect the integrity of science.

In the same way, the Quran was never read by itself but always in the context of an immense and intricate net of commentary that developed over the centuries — mystical, philosophical, legal and logical. The Arabic *quran* means “recitation,” and, Jane Dammen McAuliffe explains, the physical text was always secondary to its oral performance in the mosque. The beauty of the

chant was an essential part of its meaning, enabling a Muslim to feel “bathed” in the blessing (*baraka*) of God’s verbal presence. God himself had insisted that the Quranic message must be understood as a whole and explicitly warned Muslims against drawing partial conclusions from the text. A far cry from the two British jihadis who ordered “Islam for Dummies” from Amazon when they traveled to Syria last May.

The habit of regarding the Bible as historically accurate dates only to the Protestant Reformation; that outlook has since passed to the Muslim world. In a 2003 essay, the South African scholar Ebrahim Moosa complained that the practice of reading the Quran like “an engineering manual” had created a “text fundamentalism” that distorted its message. The appearance of the printed page, an image of precision and exactitude, also symbolized the developing scientific and commercial outlook, and has, perhaps, helped to give birth to a distinctively “modern” view of religion as logical, unmediated and objective. But like art, the truths of faith rely on intuition rather than logic. Cunningham’s account of the development of the doctrine of Christ’s incarnation relies wholly on official conciliar documents that sound arbitrary and unconvincing; it would have been more illuminating to cite the writings of Maximus the Confessor, whose work is little known in the West but whose mystical, imaginative and humanitarian insights brought a peaceful resolution to these bitter theological-political disputes.

At a time when religion is often regarded as inherently violent, the anthology reminds us that it has also been a force for peace. The insights of Dorothy Day, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King Jr. and Desmond Tutu all show that a passion for justice, nonviolence and integrity have been just as important in the history of Christianity as any Crusade. This anthology will also challenge those who believe that Islam is irredeemably intolerant and fanatical. The classical account of the prophet’s ascension to heaven, the mythical paradigm of authentic Muslim spirituality, is also a story of pluralism, since the prophets of all three monotheisms greet one another as

brothers and listen respectfully to each other's insights. Hadiths record the prophet telling Muslims not to fight jihad but to stay home and care for their parents and to follow stringently the Jews and Christians, their predecessors in faith.

But, alas, religiously articulated violence is now a fact of life. McAuliffe includes the work of Sayyid Qutb, one of the Muslim thinkers responsible for the modern enthusiasm for jihad and Osama bin Laden's declaration of war on the "Judaean-Crusader alliance." But when we also read Malcolm X explaining that his experience of the inclusiveness of the hajj inspired him to renounce his former racism; Fethullah Gülen, who insists that tolerance, forgiveness and love are central to Islam; and Tariq Ramadan, who instructs Western Muslims to embrace democracy, we gain a wider perspective. Unfortunately the Jewish and Christian editors have not included their own perpetrators of violence and intolerance in the anthology, leaving the reader, perhaps, with the misleading impression that Islam alone is guilty of this abuse of faith, even though Rabbi Meir Kahane and the Reconstructionist Gary North are also part of our modern story.

Socrates taught his disciples that a truly rational person understood how little he knew. This book will unsettle some current certainties about the nature of faith and, in so doing, may help its readers to arrive at a more nuanced and accurate perception of our predicament in this dangerously polarized world.

## THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF WORLD RELIGIONS

### Volume II: Judaism, Christianity, Islam

Edited by Jack Miles, David Biale, Lawrence S. Cunningham and Jane Dammen McAuliffe

Illustrated. 1,991 pp. W. W. Norton & Company. Sold together with "Volume I: Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism"; \$100 for the set.

***Correction: January 11, 2015***

A review on Dec. 21 about “The Norton Anthology of World Religions. Volume 1: Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism” misstated the era in which Rabbi Akiba lived. It was the second century A.D., not B.C.

Karen Armstrong’s latest book, “Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence,” was published in October.

A version of this review appears in print on December 21, 2014, on page BR9 of the Sunday Book Review with the headline: Articles of Faith.

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