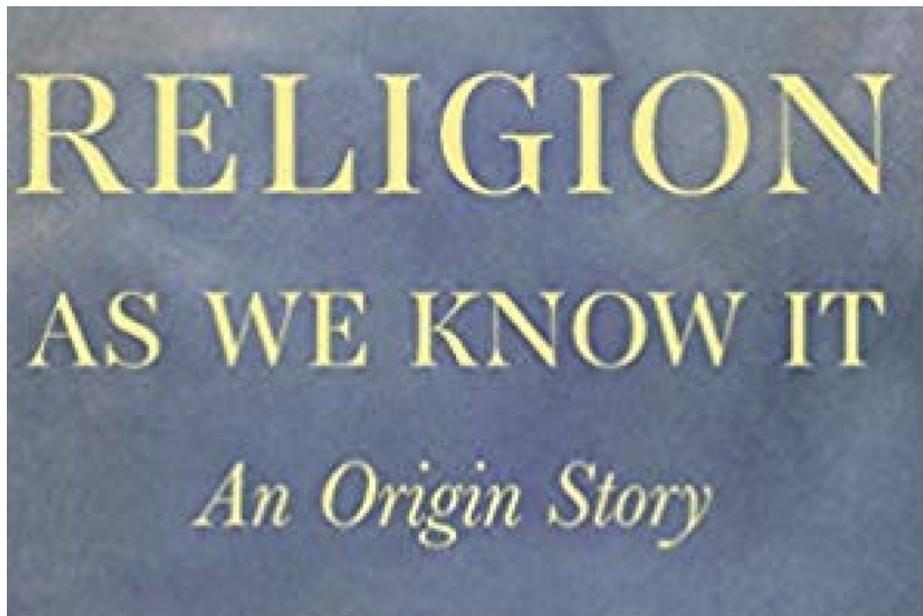


Friday, February 21, 2020



NON-FICTION

Gimme That Old-Time Religion

Two Renowned Religious Scholars Sound the Warning About Fundamentalism

📅 December 2, 2019 👤 Michael Giltz

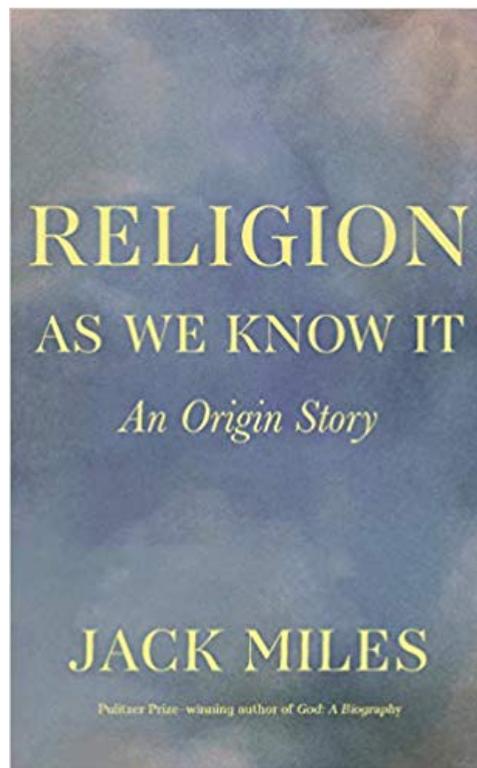
Two renowned religious scholars offer up passionate, erudite works about faith that urge those of narrow religious minds to open them up. God bless 'em for trying.

In *The Lost Art Of Scripture*, Karen Armstrong tackles religious fundamentalism, the idea that the written "scriptures" we possess today are the literal word of God. She makes clear this is a modern fancy and deeply contrary to the practice of all major faiths throughout most of human history. Mind you, for scholars like Armstrong, practices that have taken root for a few hundred years count as "new."

Jack Miles tackles the very idea of religion as we know it today. He shows what a new concept that is, the conceit of "religion" as this separate thing distinct from everything else in our lives. And fundamentalism? As Miles illustrates, any knowledge of scholarship, any awareness of religious history should make one humble before the idea of insisting on certainty about anything in matters of faith.

His book began as an introduction and postscript to the masterly Norton Anthology Of World Religions collection that Miles oversaw. Hers is a completely new enterprise. But they speak with one voice. Read both books and you'll get an education in religious history, various scholarly and religious debates over the centuries and how compassion for the other is at the core of all faiths.

Religion As We Know It

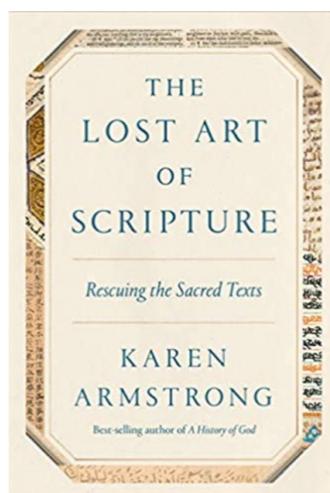


Religion As We Know It is a brisk 128 pages. Publishers Weekly heartily recommends it to students of theology; anyone embarking on religious studies surely will be its main market. Despite this scholarly audience, the essay is jargon-free and illuminating.

Miles charts the very birth of religious studies and how it is inextricably tied up with Western culture in general and Christianity in particular. Indeed, America celebrates religious pluralism in its very founding documents.

But what is religion, exactly? How do we define it, asks Miles? And off he goes, demonstrating everything from the idea of useful fictions like Thomas Jefferson's patently inaccurate but aspirational statement that "all men are created equal" to how religious studies and even the British Empire shaped the way some faiths presented their beliefs and practices to the world.

The Last Word or the First?



The work of Armstrong is by its nature bolder, more path-breaking. It's also quite a bit denser. Only those with a passion for accessible but scholarly works on faith will push through some thickets of names and dates, not to mention obscure but significant debates in this or that era.

Her main point is blindingly obvious in retrospect. Religious fundamentalism and the embrace of scripture as the literal word of God is a very modern twist. Why? For the very simple fact that throughout most of human history most

religions didn't have a written, agreed upon text. And most people were illiterate. Copies of any texts that existed were rare and contradictory, and had their origins in oral traditions dating back hundreds, if not thousands, of years.

"In the West today," Armstrong writes, "we tend to regard scripture as the Last Word, a canon sealed for all time, sacred, immutable and inviolable. But as we have already seen, in the premodern world, scripture was always a work in progress. Ancient writings were revered but not fossilized; scriptures had to speak to ever-changing circumstances and, in the process, they were often radically transformed."

The Foundation of Faith

Even for those who could lay their hands on a copy, reading scripture meant about as much to the faithful as reading sheet music would to most fans of classical music. Performance was all.

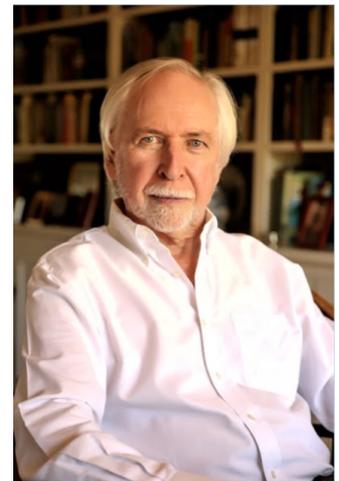
Armstrong shows how Buddhists, Jainists, Muslims, Christians, Jews, the many faiths umbrella'd under Hinduism and any other religion you can name from antiquity saw their faith as something they did, not a mere set of beliefs.

Miles puts it this way: he says religion is as religion does. "Monotheism in the abstract is a belief," he writes. "'Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone' as sung by a cantor in a synagogue is a practice," and that's what his survey of world religions focuses on.

For millennia, the purpose of all major faiths was to arouse compassion for the other, to inspire works of charity and to evoke the profound realization of how little we comprehend, to acknowledge the ineffable mystery of the very idea of God. Armstrong makes this inarguable with numerous examples from every major religion.

Pope Gregory, for example, saw the literal sense of scripture as merely a start. "Gregory regarded the historical books of the Bible as the 'foundation' of scripture, but he had little interest in their factual content," says Armstrong. "The purpose of scripture was not to instruct us in the history of Israel or the life of the early church but to effect a radical change within ourselves."

And that radical change must lead to active works of charity or all your prayers were meaningless. Armstrong says the Confucian scholar Zhu Xi told his students that the now lost art of scripture "also demanded that it issued positive, practical action; otherwise it was end-stopped, its natural dynamic frustrated.... In China, the Mandate of Heaven insisted that the ruler deal compassionately with the 'little people'.... [In India,] the Buddha sent his monks out to travel through the world to help suffering people deal with their pain."



Jack Miles

Faith No More

Both Armstrong and Miles hint at a scandalous approach to scripture, both to avoid the trap of facing science and history on their own turf and to return religion to first principals. They suggest in their own ways that we think of these texts as akin to great works of literature.

War and Peace isn't a word-for-word accurate account of real events. And yet it awakens in readers empathy for others, offers philosophical insights and raises consciousness of the horrors of war. It has profound value even if it's not "true."

The same holds for countless other works of fiction, philosophy, poetry and, yes, faith. Indeed, that's precisely how texts like the Five Books of Moses and the Vedas and the Iliad and so many other works were seen by most for most of history. They were true in every important sense, just not literally so.

The mystery of existence itself and of God is at their heart. Armstrong says, "...right up to the early modern period, sages, poets and theologians insisted that what we call 'God,' 'Brahman' or 'Dao' was ineffable, indescribable and unknowable." Quoting everyone from the philosopher Martin Heidegger to the poet William Wordsworth, Armstrong says God was in many ways Reality itself.

"Not only did God have no gender, but leading theologians and mystics insisted that God did not 'exist' in any way that we can understand," she writes. Heidegger, Armstrong says, termed it Being, a "fundamental energy that supports

and pervades everything that exists. You cannot see, touch or hear it, but can only watch it mysteriously at work in the people, objects and natural forces that it informs.”

Armstrong and Miles clearly hope fundamentalists will open their minds to the history of religion and open their hearts to the mystery of God. That would bring their practices closer to the real power these scholars believe faith has always been best at: a celebration of empathy and modesty and compassion.

Their work is thoughtful, engaging and respectful, the sort of qualities the very act of studying various religions encourages. But the people who need to read these books most probably never will. I fear Armstrong and Miles are preaching to the choir.



*Karen Armstrong photo by OneBlue.org
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Tags: Buddhism, Christianity, Jack Miles, Karen Armstrong, Religion As We Know It, The Lost Art Of Scripture

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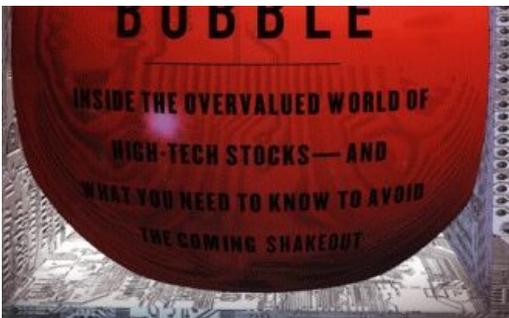
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Michael Giltz

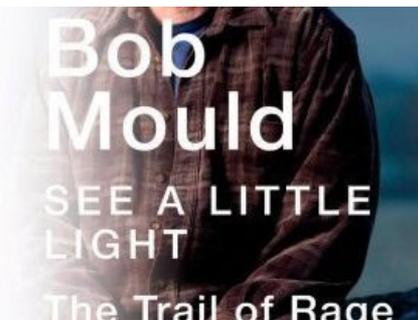
Michael Giltz is a freelance writer based in New York City covering all areas of entertainment, politics, sports and more. He has written extensively for the New York Post, New York Daily News, New York Magazine, The Advocate, Out, Huffington Post, Premiere Magazine, Entertainment Weekly, BookFilter, USA Today and the Los Angeles Times. He co-hosts the long-running podcast Showbiz Sandbox.

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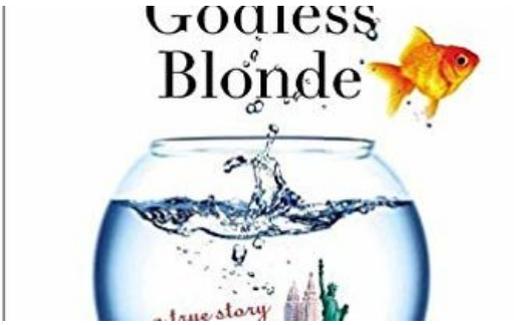
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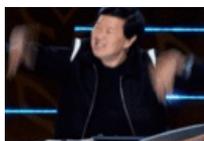
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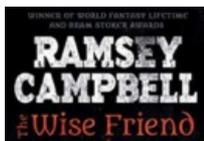
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