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Islam: A Short History [Modern Library Chronicles]



Synopsis

In the public mind, Islam is a religion of extremes: it is the world's fastest growing faith; more than three-quarters of the world's refugees are Islamic; it has produced government by authoritarian monarchies in Saudi Arabia and ultra-republicans in Iran. Whether we are reading about civil war in Algeria or Afghanistan, the struggle for the soul of Turkey, or political turmoil in Pakistan or Malaysia, the Islamic context permeates all these situations. Yet who really understands the central tenets of this faith, or why so many people around the world have turned to 'fundamentalism'? Karen Armstrong's elegant and concise book traces how Islam grew from the other religions of the book, Judaism and Christianity; introduces us to the character of Muhammed; and demonstrates that for much of its history, the religion has been a force for enlightenment that promoted liberties for women and allowed the arts and sciences to flourish. "Islam" shows how this progressive legacy is today often set aside as the faith struggles to come to terms with the economic and political weakness of most of its believers and with the forces of modernity itself. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

It's a pity this book isn't a standard text for secondary school students. The history of Islam is something all Westerners should learn in their teens - and don't. Robinson's book is both a revelation and an indictment of our collective ignorance."Islam, A Short History" is densely written, and sympathetically describes the evolution not only of the Islamic world, but also of the practices and tenets of this major monotheistic religion. Armstrong's tome not only dwells on the history of

Islam, but also traces most major currents of thought within Dar al-Islam. She examines the evolution of Sharia (Islamic law), Sufism, the Ismailis, Twelver Shiism, and Wahhabism, just to mention a few of the streams that comprise this river. Best of all, this volume is written in plain English, simply written, incisive when need be, concise if not. Ten maps show the ebb and flow of Islam: The illustrate the early conquests, the growth of the Umayyad Empire, the disintegration of the Abbasid Empire, the extent of the Seljuk Empire, the geography of the Middle Eastern Crusader states (in the 12th century), the threatening Mongol world in the 13th century, The Safavid Empire, the Moghul Empire in India, and the Ottoman Empire. The amirs, caliphs, ulamas, qadis (judges), and a host of other political, military, administrative, and religious figures are examined and put into their historical contexts. "Islam, A Short History" contains a first-class 275-entry (!) chronology, a listing of 118 historical figures (!) from the history of Islam, a VERY exhaustive listing of additional readings (bibliography), and a good index. (The only weak point is a somewhat truncated glossary of Arabic terms.) Of the many books I have read about Islam, this is the one I would recommend as the first to read - it is a the perfect introduction to a fascinating (and almost unknown) new world.

Karen Armstrong would like to believe in the Prophet Mohammad, not because of his visions or poetry or even his special relationship to God, but because of his ability to create a compassionate and unified movement out of the chaotic tribalism of sixth century Arabia. She also wants to believe that Islam is at least as much social experiment--in equality, compassion, and surrender to God--as it is doctrines or rituals. For Muslims, Armstrong writes, "salvation does not mean redemption from sin, but the creation of a just society." That's a long way from hanging the burned body parts of Americans on public bridges, but that's exactly why this book should be on every American voter's reading list. It's not so much to find out the objective facts of Islam (though there are plenty of those), but to understand the religion's deepest yearnings and view of the world. If you've bought into the American party line on Islam, the last 40 pages of this book are going to be hard to swallow--Armstrong's litany of Western imperialism and meddling are unflinching and humbling. Violent Islamicists also come in for their own share of criticism. Alarmed by the failure of Western materialism to satisfy spiritual needs, Armstrong fears that Islam will fail in its calling to justice and compassion. The broad premise of this calling--that religion might provide an enduring improvement in social life--is the possibility Armstrong is most interested in, the desire that makes sense of past and present. Muslims carry this sense and desire into every part of their lives. It may not be important for us to do the same, but refusing to recognize its grip on Muslim hearts and minds is where the battle of Fallujah really began.

I have tried to read up on the history of Islam before, and selected books written by Islamic scholars. The problem with them was they assumed a knowledge of the Quran and were written for Muslims. Armstrong is writing for a western audience, for those who have no great exposure to Islamic teachings. What she has written is a very concise and objective run through of the history of the rise of Islam. The writing is spare and spartan, and seems to have concentrated on keeping opinion out of the book. For the most part she sticks to simple facts. As a result what you get is a dry and unemotional style of writing which tells you what you want to know without engaging with you. I see from other reviews that Christian fundamentalists are condemning this book for being soft on Islam, while the Muslims are calling it "anti-Islamic propaganda". I figure that is a pretty good sign that it has trodden a middle path. Certainly to me it appears to be as objective as it is possible to be. I wanted a history, not an apology for Islam, nor a condemnation of it. What comes across clearly to me from this book is that Islam suffers from the exact same problem as Christianity. If you follow in the footsteps of either Christ or Mahommed you will live a good life. But there are many who claim to be Christians and Muslims who live lives that are truly repugnant. What is most difficult is to resolve secular and political realities with religious belief. Christians have tried to do this by taking religion out of politics, whereas Muslims have tried to subjugate politics to religion. No one has perfected the marriage yet.

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