

Book Review

A History of Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths by Karen Armstrong, HarperCollins, London 1996, pp. 471. Price HB £20

An understanding of the history of Jerusalem is a vital necessity to anyone concerned with the interrelationships of Judaism, of Christianity and of Islam. From the time of David the history of the Jewish people has been focused there, and until the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE so was their worship. Jesus was crucified outside the walls of the city, and the Christian church had its beginnings there. From the beginnings of Islam, Jerusalem has been revered next only after Makkah and Madinah as the destination of Muhammad's Night Journey *al-isra'* and site of his Ascension *al-mi'raj*. Over the centuries Jerusalem has been both the site and the subject of contention between the three great monotheistic religions. To each religion the history of the city informs the myth, and the myth colours the view of history. Because our myths are different we have difficulty in coming to a common view of the one city.

The literature on Jerusalem is as large as its position in the history of three religions. There has, however, until the present volume been no modern synthesis of the whole sweep of the city's historical, religious and symbolic being.

Karen Armstrong's book progresses remarkably smoothly from the bronze age to the present day. Of its eighteen chapters six cover the period BCE, six the first millennium of the Common Era and six the second. She draws information from archaeology, from the Bible and other ancient texts, from authors of the first millennium and from more modern sources. The synthesis is well done and the writing elegant, but full of information and insight. There will be few of any tradition who do not gain in understanding of their own background from this book. By taking a long and impartial view of the history of that

troubled city, the author exposes the steps by which we have arrived at the present troubled state. She does not attempt to propose solutions, but implies that a mutual respect for each other's beliefs will be a necessary precondition.

The book as a whole is well balanced, but to fit within less than 500 pages inevitably selective and lacking in historiographic detail. For the student beginning on a study of Jerusalem or of any of the three religions this book will provide an invaluable framework on which to hang more detailed study. For the interested layman, the book is easy to read, informative and above all thought provoking. The more specialised reader will be learned indeed if there are not many places where the breadth of this book provides new insights and contextual assistance. The maps and plans are excellent, with consistent scale and style which make the serial changes easy to appreciate. If there is a disappointment it is the photographs, which only occasionally succeed in illustrating the text except very elliptically. The bibliography and the chapter notes are extensive but it is not always possible to discover from the notes the source of information of interest in the text.

Dr. Anthony Birch