

Review: DI215

A SUMMARY CRITIQUE

A BIASED HISTORY OF ISLAM

a book review of
Islam: A Short History
by Karen Armstrong
(The Modern Library, 2000)

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Karen Armstrong, billed on the jacket as “one of the world’s foremost scholars on religious affairs,” comments on everything from the Christian Crusades, the formation of the state of Israel in 1948, the taking of hostages by Ayatollah Khomeini and his issuance of a *fatwah* on author Salman Rushdie, and Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam to the Taliban in her book *Islam: A Short History*. It is important to note that the book was published prior to the destruction that occurred in the United States on September 11, 2001. Armstrong’s observations, though often flawed because of her rose-colored view of Islam’s mysticism, accurately reveal the impending nightmare of the Taliban. She harshly condemns the Taliban as fundamentalist and contrary to the Qur’an.

While I wholeheartedly agree with Armstrong’s condemnation of the Taliban and its ideology and actions, I still must take issue with a number of critical observations and statements that she makes throughout her book. Her premise is that Islam is a religion of peace and tolerance, despite the fact that the West has incorrectly, and contrary to fact in her opinion, stereotyped it as a religion that provokes and promotes violence and intolerance.

A Community of Muslims. Armstrong writes, “The Qur’an did not put forward any philosophical arguments for monotheism; its approach was practical, and as such, appealed to the pragmatic Arabs. The old religion, the Qur’an claimed, was simply not working. There was spiritual malaise....The way forward lay in a single God and unified *ummah* (Muslim community), which was governed by justice and equity” (8). Armstrong repeats this Qur’anic ideal throughout her book. She explains that to follow the Qur’an is to work to establish a politically and socially Muslim community that adheres to and upholds Qur’anic principles. She critiques the Taliban’s fundamentalist attempt at establishing this community as hopelessly evil and unislamic, even though the principles they so aggressively and terribly carry out into action (i.e., the subjugation of Islamic women and mutilation and stoning as forms of punishment) come directly from the Qur’an. Her problem lies in her premise. Armstrong’s premise is that Islam is a peaceful and tolerant religion, and the violence and intolerance that is so often associated with it is unislamic and fundamentalist. It is with this premise that I take issue.

Is This Allah? According to Armstrong, the Qur’an advocates the one transcendent God as opposed to paganism, “much like Taoism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, monotheism in the Middle East, and rationalism in Europe...[these faiths] focused on a single deity or supreme symbol of transcendence” (7). Armstrong astonishingly concludes: “Constantly the Qur’an points out that Muhammad had not come to cancel the older religions, to contradict their prophets or to start a new faith. His message is the same as

that of Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon, or Jesus" (8)! It is true that the Qur'an mentions these names; however, the proclamations it makes about each of them are not the same as, and cannot be reconciled with, the proclamations found in Scripture.

As a mystic, Armstrong's conceptual understanding of the transcendent is also flawed. She simply understands that it is One. Moreover, in her view God is so totally different from humans that this former nun can accept the Qur'an's denials of the Trinity and the incarnation of the Son of God as human to die for us. According to Armstrong, love is above all else, including conceptual truth. She, therefore, lauds the Muslim Sufis as she perceives them rising above the religious wars because they rejected conceptual truth. She also praises monasticism and mystical spirituality (74–75; 90–93, 122; cf. my review of Karen Armstrong's *A History of God, Christian Research Journal*, 18, no. 4 [1996]: 52).

The Qur'an: A Divine Revelation? Armstrong alleges that Jews and Christians sometimes taunted the Arabs for having no prophet and no Scripture (3). In answer to this taunt, in the year 610, "the prophet Muhammad (570–632) receives his first revelation of the Qur'an in Mecca and two years later begins to preach" (xiii). The first "revelation" of Muhammad to which Armstrong refers is recorded to have occurred on the 17th night of the month of Ramadan when Muhammad "woke to find himself overpowered by a devastating presence which squeezed him tightly until he heard the first words of a new Arab's scripture pouring from his lips" (4). Muhammad spoke of the pain involved in receiving the revelations. As Armstrong puts it: "His whole body was torn away from him. The impact was so frightening that his whole body convulsed; he would often sweat profusely even on a cool day, experience great heaviness, or hear strange sounds or voices" (5).

Today, persons who allegedly receive "revelations" like this might be called channelers, mediums, or spiritualists. Those familiar with Mormonism will note remarkable similarities between the stories of the revelations of its founder, Joseph Smith, and those of Islam's Muhammad. In the same way as Muhammad desired to present a special revelation to his people, Smith lamented the lack of God's revelation to Americans. It is also recorded that God enabled Smith, a young man who had not studied any languages, to translate gold plates and produce a revelation. Would Armstrong uncritically refer to the Book of Mormon as divine "revelation" in the same way she does the Qur'an?

The one true God, the God of the Bible, provides His people with tests to distinguish true prophets from false prophets: first, their teaching must be consistent with previous Scripture (Deut. 13:1–3); second, their signs must come to pass (Deut. 18: 21–22); and third, Jesus tells us, "by their fruit you will recognize them" (Matt. 7:16). Muhammad explicitly contradicted the biblical teaching that Jesus is the Son of God and regarded basic Christian belief as idolatrous blasphemy. Muhammad also performed no miracles, which could be tested. Finally, what sort of fruit did Muhammad bring forth? Was violence one of his fruits?

Islam's Violence as a "Myth." Armstrong's history claims, "Ever since the Crusades, the people of western Christendom developed a stereotypical and distorted image of Islam... Islam was described by the learned scholar-monks of Europe as an inherently violent and intolerant faith, which had only been able to establish itself by the sword. The myth of the supposed fanatical intolerance of Islam has become one of the received ideas of the West" (179–80). She explains, "Muhammad never asked Jews or Christians to accept Islam, unless they particularly wished to do so, because they received perfectly valid revelations of their own. The Qur'an insists strongly that 'there shall be no coercion in matters of faith' (Sura 2:256) and commands Muslims to respect the beliefs of Jews and Christians" (10). These quotes from the Qur'an, while authentic, contradict others that expressly command the subjugation of "infidels."

The answer to the contradiction may lie in this quote from the Qur'an that Armstrong brings to our attention: "Do not argue with the followers of earlier revelations otherwise than in a most kindly manner — unless it be such of them as are bent on evil-doing (Sura 29: 46)" (10). It is up to those who are interpreting the text and leading the people to decide just what makes others "bent on evil-doing." In addition, though the Qur'an says, "Fight in the way of Allah against those who fight against you, but begin not hostilities. Lo! Allah loveth not aggressors" (Sura 2:190), what constitutes an aggressor? What if

Jews and Christians are considered aggressors by simply affirming Christ's deity or supporting Israel? Contrary to the "peaceful" passages quoted by Armstrong and even the other passages encouraging only defensive fighting, the Qur'an also commands Muslims to "fight against such of those who have been given the Scripture as believe not in Allah nor the Last Day, and forbid not that which Allah hath forbidden by His messenger, and follow not the religions of truth, until they pay tribute readily, being brought low" (Sura 9:29). The Qur'an has an explicit command to Muslims in regard to those who do not pay tribute or believe in Islam: "Kill them, Allah will torment them by your hands. He will humiliate them and give you victory over them" (Sura 9:5).

Armstrong's claim that Islam's intolerance is a "myth" is difficult to harmonize with excerpts from her own "Chronology":

- 622 Because people in Mecca reject his claim to divine revelations, Muhammad flees to Medina and "vows revenge."
- 624 Muslims inflict a dramatic defeat on Mecca at the Battle of Badr.
- 627 Muslims soundly defeat the Meccan army at the Battle of Trench. This is followed by the massacre of the men of the Jewish tribe of Qurayzah, which had supported Meccans against the Muslims.
- 628 Muhammad...is now seen as the most powerful man in Arabia.
- 634-44 The Muslim armies invade Iraq, Syria and Egypt.
- 638 The Muslims conquer Jerusalem.
- 656 Caliph Uthman is assassinated by malcontent Muslim soldiers.
- 656-60 The first fitnah (temptation, trial). Civil war ensues.

Armstrong and others who share her view that Islam is a religion of tolerance and peace often point to violence in Christian history (i.e. the Crusades) to try to show that violent events in a religion's history do not a violent religion make. The difference on this level, however, between Islam and Christianity is not in the violent acts people have committed in the name of their faith. The difference is rather in the fact that the Qur'an and its Allah encourage warfare against "infidels" while the New Testament and Jesus encourage the conversion of unbelievers through the spread of the Good News through word and good will, without bloodshed. In other words, it is not merely that violent events have occurred in the name of Islam, for violent events have occurred in the name of Christianity and most religions; but what sets Islam apart is that the Qur'an and its God at times encourage the killing of those who do not adhere to Muslim theology.

A Muslim's "Chief Duty." Throughout her tome, Armstrong presents an idealized Islam as the one that is practiced throughout the world. She says,

Their sacred Scripture, the Qur'an, gave them a historical mission. Their chief duty was to create a just community in which all members, even the most weak and vulnerable, were treated with absolute respect....A Muslim had to redeem history, and that meant that state affairs were not a distraction from spirituality but the stuff of religion itself. The political well-being of the Muslim community was a matter of supreme importance....If state institutions did not measure up to the Qur'anic ideal, if their political leaders were cruel or exploitive, or if their community was humiliated by apparently irreligious enemies, a Muslim could feel that his or her faith in life's ultimate purpose and value was in jeopardy. (xi-xii)

In order to justify the fact that Islamic history contradicts this ideal — that all members of the community are to be treated with absolute respect — Armstrong explains that "the historical trials and tribulations of the Muslim community — political assassinations, civil wars, invasions, and the rise and fall of the ruling dynasties — were not divorced from the interior religious quest, but were of the essence of the Islamic vision" (xii). For Armstrong, therefore, it is reasonable that Muslims resort to violent upheavals and the like because they only do so in an effort to fulfill the ideal set forth in the Qur'an. I would argue, however, that good motives do not justify evil means. Furthermore, by supplying this history of aggression and violence, does not Armstrong contradict her claim that intolerance is just a Western stereotype?

The Crusades. Armstrong refrains from describing the Muslims' atrocities in detail when they conquered Jerusalem in 638. In great detail, however, she describes how "the Crusaders massacred some thirty thousand Jews and Muslims in Jerusalem, turning the thriving holy city into a stinking charnel house. For at least five months the valleys and ditches around the city were filled with putrefying corpses...a stench hung over Jerusalem, where the three religions of Abraham had been able to coexist in relative harmony under Islamic rule for nearly five hundred years. This was the Muslims' first experience of the Christian West" (179). The Crusades actually began because the Seljuk Turks, fanatical Muslims who took Jerusalem from their fellow Muslims, had butchered Jews and Christians (and their fellow Muslims) and made it impossible for Jews and Christians to continue to live in, or Christian Europeans to make pilgrimages to, the Holy Land (see Bruce L. Shelley's *Church History in Plain Language* [Word, 1995]). Once again, the difference between these actions on the part of Christians and similar ones on the part of Muslims lies in what each of the religion's sacred books has to say about such actions. The Bible, however much the popes and crusaders stated otherwise, does not encourage militant action in the name of spreading the Christian faith. The Qur'an, as shown earlier in this review, does encourage militant action against "infidels." This is why, on the whole, the history of Islam has been much more violent than that of Christianity.

I will conclude this review by briefly surveying Armstrong's views on a few relevant topics.

Israel. Armstrong displays great sympathy for Palestinians in her discussion on Israel. She observes, "In 1948 the Arabs of Palestine lost their homeland to the Zionists, who set up the Jewish secular state of Israel there, with the support of the United Nations and the international community. The loss of Palestine became a potent symbol of the humiliation of the Muslim world at the hands of the Western powers, who seemed to feel no qualms about the dispossession and permanent exile of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians" (149).

Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam. By offering a brief history of the Nation of Islam, Armstrong attempts to convince her readers that it is this radical fringe group that causes people to believe that Islam is a fanatical religion. She explains,

Some Muslims, such as Malcolm X (1925–65), the charismatic leader of the black separatist group called the Nation of Islam, gained widespread respect at the time of the Civil Rights movement, and became an emblem of Black and Muslim power. The Nation of Islam, however, was a heterodox party. Founded in 1930 by Wallace Fard, a pedlar of Detroit, and, after the mysterious disappearance of Fard in 1934 led by Elijah Muhammad (1897–1975), it claimed that God had been incarnated in Fard, that white people are inherently evil and that there was no life after death — all views that are heretical from an Islamic perspective. The Nation of Islam demanded a separate state for African Americans to compensate them for the years of slavery, and is adamantly hostile to the West. Malcolm X became disillusioned with the Nation of Islam, however, when he discovered the moral laxity of Elijah Muhammad, and took his followers into Sunni Islam: two years later he was assassinated for this apostasy. But the Nation of Islam still gains far more media coverage than the much larger American Muslim Mission, founded by Malcolm X, which is now wholly orthodox, sends its members to study at al-Azhar and explores the possibility of working alongside white Americans for a more just society. *The bizarre and rejectionist stance of the Nation may seem closer to the Western stereotype of Islam as an inherently intolerant and fanatical faith.* (177, emphasis added)

The Taliban and Afghanistan. As stated earlier in this review, *Islam: A Short History* was published prior to September 11. In the wake of that devastation, Armstrong's critical observations about the Taliban will be well received by her readers. She explicitly condemns the Taliban:

A man called Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966) insisted that the Qur'anic injunction to toleration could occur only after the political victory of Islam and the establishment of a true Muslim state....Every Sunni fundamentalist movement has been influenced by Qutb. Most spectacularly, it has inspired Muslims to assassinate such leaders as Anwar al-Sadat....The Taliban, who came to power in Afghanistan in 1994, are also affected by his ideology. They are determined to return to what they see as the original vision of Islam....Only religious broadcasting is permitted and the Islamic

punishments of stoning and mutilation have been reintroduced....The ethnic chauvinism between the Pashtun tribe and the people in the north, and the harsh treatment of minority groups is also opposed to clear Qur'anic requirements. The Taliban's discrimination against women is completely opposed to the practice of the Prophet and the conduct of the first *ummah* (Muslim community). (169-70)

As much as she would like to have her readers believe otherwise, the Taliban's interpretations of the Qur'an's teachings are not wholly in opposition to Qur'anic ideals.

Islam: A Short History is a book for those already familiar with Islam, as it is written from a highly biased and rose-colored perspective. Armstrong's readable summation of Islamic history, however, helps one understand the numerous Muslim sects that developed as they tried to follow Muhammad's example, interpret the Qur'an, and develop viable, theocratic nations. Other useful features in this book include a chronology (which outlines major events in Islamic history), a list of key figures in the history of Islam, a glossary of Arabic terms, and suggestions for further reading.

— reviewed by Gordon R. Lewis