



Karen Armstrong:

**Don't do to others
you don't want others
to do to you**

By Drs Monique Kester

Karen Armstrong writes books about Judaism, Christianity and Islam. She was a nun for seven years. She left the order in 1969. Later she graduated at Oxford and became an English teacher. In 1982 she published 'Through the Narrow Gate', which described the restricted and narrow life she experienced in the convent. She has since become a prolific writer and an expert on subjects touching on all of the three major monotheistic religions. In 1999 she was honoured by the Islamic Centre of Southern California for her work on the meaning of faith and religion for life and society. This 'runaway nun' is full of rebellious thoughts. She compared Pope John Paul II with a Muslim fundamentalist.

All religions, especially fundamentalist ones, claim to be based on love, respect and forgiveness. How could a pattern of cruelty emerge among them?

Only Christian-Protestant movements, claiming to go back to their roots, call themselves fundamentalists. Other religions don't like this term, because it doesn't correspond with the aims they try to accomplish. We must not forget that there is an element of pugnacity in every world religion, always originating from violent living conditions. In the West we worry about violence on television and the influence it has on our children. But the attitude, dreams and relations of people who live in a violent environment will certainly be effected by violence. They are likely to develop militant behaviour.

Is it possible to have a peaceful society without religion?

Yes, secularisation is a new experiment. We are religious creatures and we have never tried to be holy without a religion before. Secularisation has also brought mischief upon us. Hitler, Stalin and others showed that secularisation can be as disastrous as a fanatic religion. Both originate from greed, power and nationalism. That never leads to something good.

What is YOUR religious experience? You were a nun once. Do you (still) believe in God?

I don't think faith is important. In the western world we have turned faith into a fetish. We call religious people believers. When we want to know if they are religious, we ask them: 'Do you believe?'. Religion is not about believing in something, it's about doing something! Behave yourself in a way that leads to change. Religion is not about believing in God, it's about compassion. Being continuously compassionate in a disciplined way could lead to an experience some people would call God, Brahma or Nirvana. It's useless to wonder whether you believe or not, because as long as there is no compassion, you won't be able to experience the divine. Supernatural speculations about God are meaningless. Friendliness and empathy can lead to a divine experience. Not the other way round.

What qualities are necessary to become a good leader?

You must be well informed, especially about topics that are hot. This means that when you speak about Islam, you must know what you are talking about. Quite often that is not the case. Furthermore you have to be critical towards yourself and you may not accuse others. The truth has to be told under all circumstances. It still surprises me that the American presence in Iraq is based on lies. God only knows what more is kept secret from us. A leader has to be responsible and must be able to address any topic. Everything has to be subject to discussion, including your own policy. Criticising the US government is almost impossible.

What is in your opinion the most important responsibility of a religious or political leader?

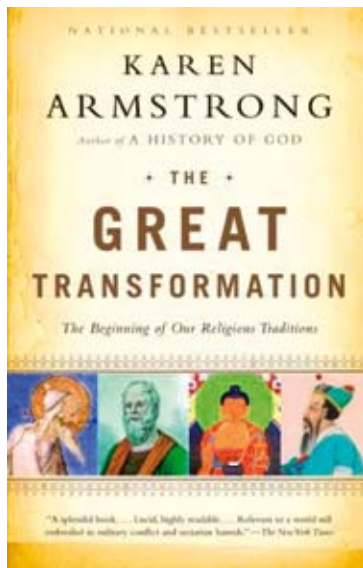
The promotion of the virtue named compassion. A leader should

not waste time on trivial matters like what people believe or on discussions about the Holy Trinity, the divinity of Jesus, etc. The holy Paul says: 'I can believe strongly that I can literally move mountains, but when I fail to do charity work it is worthless'. A political or religious leader should go back to the foundations of all world religions, e.g. friendliness and compassion.

Do you support president Bush's War on Terror?

His policy has worsened the situation. The way prisoners at Guantanamo Bay are treated! Not long ago I had a conversation with Desmond Tutu. He told me that the British warned the South African government, during the fight against apartheid, not to incarcerate anyone without a proper trial. Otherwise they would prove not to understand the meaning of democracy. That is why the United States should not be a part of the modern

democratic world. Some prisoners at Guantanamo Bay have been imprisoned for 5 years, without any form of trial. They have been tortured. This is not only bad for democracy, our identity and peace, but plays into the hands of Osama Bin Laden. We know that fundamentalistic movements become more extreme and violent after every attack. They are convinced that our modern and liberal Western society is aiming to destroy fundamentalism. Every act against Muslims confirms that bias. The attack on Iraq was absurd, illegal and against international laws. If a super power breaks an international law, people all over the world will be disappointed and lose trust in democracy. Fundamentalist religion is a response to and product of modern culture.



Even rabbis, sheikhs, bishops and the Pope take decisions that cause hostility. How is that possible?

That's because man has no compassion, or doesn't want to be compassionate. People want to be right and don't want to show compassion. Their egos are stronger. To be able to show compassion, you have to let go of your ego, get out of the centre of your life and put somebody else in place. Not many people are able to do this. Most religious leaders are in fact politicians. People like Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama succeeded in letting their egos go and do not suffer from megalomania. They are role models for humanity. Self-conceit is put above justice. People like to say: 'I am right, the other one isn't'. Religion is like art: it is very difficult to be good at it. Not every pianoplayer will reach the same level as Vladimir Ashkenazy and not every amateur cook will be as good as Jamie Oliver. It is very difficult to 'practice' religion in a decent manner.

Did the events on 9/11 come to you as a complete surprise?

Deep down I knew something was going to happen, but I never expected a horror movie like this. We saw airplanes hitting the Twin Towers live on television. As if we had not learned anything from Auschwitz. I was invited by NATO to give a lecture. A Lebanese scholar gave a fascinating explanation of Islam, politics and the roots of terrorism. But NATO generals were interested in only one thing: how to get rid of the Muslim

communities in their countries as fast as possible. According to them the best solution would be sending them back to their countries of origin, but that is not a very realistic option. As a consequence Muslims had to become invisible, assimilate into society. I said: 'We can never let people 'disappear' just like that in modern Europe. Considering where we come from, we aren't even allowed to discuss that possibility'. A thousand years of prejudice, propagated and fed by the church, made it possible for Hitler to seize power. This has cast a large shadow over our culture. I think that is one of the reasons why many Europeans are cautious about religion. We know religion has played an important part in many horrible moments in history. Church leaders usually didn't even interfere. A German general said: 'This is OUR culture, they have to integrate into OUR culture'. I answered: 'Now you probably understand what we, as colonial powers, have brought about in the countries we conquered. We changed their local culture forever. Immigrants came here because of all the misery we brought to their countries'. A Frenchman said: 'When we allow women to wear a veil, they won't go to a male doctor, won't send their children to a public school and finally they might join Al-Qaeda.' A German added: 'The Turks in my country don't go to German restaurants, they go their own restaurants and amusement centres.' I replied: 'That makes me think of the British in India and Egypt. They didn't go to Egyptian or Indian restaurants, but to their own clubs and hotels'. It was a terrible afternoon. This was a NATO summit! That's the way the generals speak. God knows what the troops think.

What about our politicians?

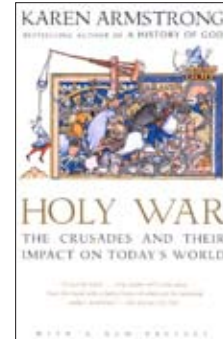
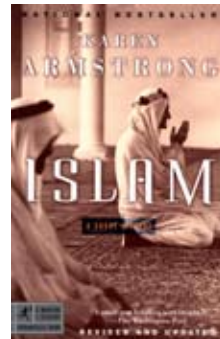
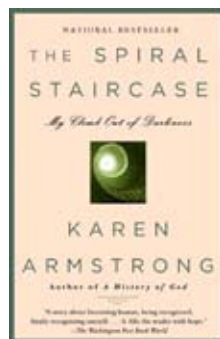
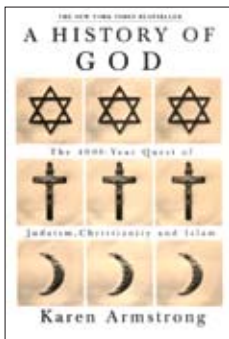
I don't know. I talked to a couple of Congressmen in the United States. They were interested in what I had to say, but they hardly knew anything! They advised me not to pursue a career at the Foreign Office. Not many qualified people want to work there, which has of course consequences. After 9/11 they had to find Arab interpreters, because nobody in the Pentagon or the White House was able to speak Arabic. Unbelievable!

Do you have a message for the world or to one person in particular?

Have compassion with your fellow human beings. The essence of religion, and politics, should be the following golden rule: don't do to others you don't want others to do to you. The great religious leader Confucius was the first one to apply this rule in 500 B.C. This is the foundation of all religions. Considering globalisation, it should also be the foundation of our political behaviour, so we can learn that other nations (or minorities in our own countries) are just as important as we are. We see more and more minority groups with destructive powers. A policy preaching we are number one and at the same time making others subject to humiliation, makes us lose faith in the political system and the fundamentalists mad. This is not the way I like to look at the future.

How would you like to be remembered?

As a powerful voice for interfaith understanding. One person is not better than the other. Every person has his own unicity. All peoples of the world have their own laws. If we just could accept and... appreciate that, their could be a major change. Then there will be hope again! 🎓



Karen Armstrong is an author who writes on Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Buddhism. Armstrong is a former nun, now a "freelance monotheist". She has advanced the theory that fundamentalist religion is a response to and product of modern culture. She was born into a family with Irish roots who after her birth moved to Bromsgrove and later to Birmingham. According to professor Juan Eduardo Campo, Karen Armstrong has been influential in conveying the more objective post-19th-century scholarship of Islam to a wide readership in Europe and North America. For further information: karenarmstrong@speakersacademy.eu

"It must be possible to bring reason, spirituality, and ethics together in our thinking about the world. This would be the beginning of a rational approach to our deepest personal concerns. It would also be the end of faith."
—Sam Harris—