

# Discovering the common ground of world religions

Interview with Karen Armstrong  
by Andrea Bistrich

*Karen Armstrong, the British theologian and author of numerous books on the great religions, has advanced the theory that fundamentalist religion is a response to and product of modern culture. A Catholic nun for seven years, she left her order while studying at Oxford University. She is one of the 18 leading group members of the Alliance of Civilizations, an initiative of the former UN General Secretary Kofi Annan, with the purpose of fighting extremism and furthering dialogue between the Western and Islamic worlds. Andrea Bistrich interviewed her for **Share International**.*

**Share International:** 9/11 has become the symbol of major hostilities between Islam and the West. After the attacks many Americans asked: "Why do they hate us?" And experts in numerous roundtable talks debated if Islam is an inherently violent religion. Is it?

Karen Armstrong: There is far more violence in the Bible than in the Qur'an; the idea that Islam imposed itself by the sword is a Western fiction, fabricated during the time of the Crusades when, in fact, it was Western Christians who were fighting brutal holy wars against Islam. The Qur'an forbids aggressive warfare and permits war only in self-defence. The moment the enemy sues for peace, the Qur'an insists that Muslims must lay down their arms and accept whatever terms are offered, even if they are disadvantageous. Later Muslim law forbade Muslims to attack a country where Muslims were permitted to practice their faith freely; the killing of civilians was prohibited, as were the destruction of property and the use of fire in warfare.

**SI:** Despite such interdictions in the Qur'an some Muslims have become murderers. How can people be religious and yet be willing to blow themselves up and kill others in the name of Allah?

KA: To kill a single human being violates the principles of every single religion, including Islam. Terrorism is an unreligious act. Muslims have repeatedly disowned the

terrorists, but this is rarely reported in the Western media. Terror is a political act, which may use (or abuse) the language of religion, but it absorbs some of the nihilistic violence of modernity, which has created self-destructive nuclear weapons and still threatens to use them today. An important survey showed that every single suicide bombing since the 1980s was politically rather than religiously motivated: the main grievance was the occupation by the West and its allies of Muslim lands.

**SI:** The sense of polarization has been sharpened by recent controversies – the Danish cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed, the Pope's remarks about Islam, the issue of face-veils and whether they hinder integration. Harvard-Professor Samuel Huntington introduced the notion of a "clash of civilizations". Are the "Christian West" and the "Muslim World" fundamentally incompatible?

KA: The divisions in our world are not the result of religion or culture but are politically based. There is an imbalance of power in the world, and the powerless are beginning to challenge the hegemony of the "Great Powers", declaring their independence of them – often using religious language to do so. A lot of what we call "fundamentalism" can often be seen as a religious form of nationalism, an assertion of identity. The old 19th century European nationalist ideal has become tarnished and has always been foreign to the Middle East. In the Muslim world, people are redefining themselves according to their religion in an attempt to return to their roots after the great colonialist disruption.

**SI:** What has made fundamentalism so apparently predominant today?

KA: The militant piety that we call "fundamentalism" erupted in every single major world faith in the course of the 20th cen-



photo: Jerry Bauer

Karen Armstrong

tury. There is fundamentalist Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, Sikhism, Hinduism and Confucianism as well as fundamentalist Islam. Of the three monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – Islam was the last to develop a fundamentalist strain during the 1960s.

Fundamentalism represents a revolt against secular modern society, which separates religion and politics. Wherever a Western secularist government is established, a religious counter-culturalist protest movement rises up alongside it in conscious rejection. Fundamentalists want to bring God and religion from the sidelines to which they have been relegated in modern culture back to centre stage. All fundamentalism is rooted in a profound fear of annihilation; whether they are Jewish, Christian or Muslim, fundamentalists are convinced that secular or liberal society wants to wipe them out. This is not paranoid: Jewish fundamentalism took two major strides forward: one after the Nazi Holocaust, the second after the Yom Kippur War of 1973. In some parts of the Middle East, secularism was established so rapidly and aggressively that it was experienced as a lethal assault.

**SI:** The fact that fundamentalism is also a phenomenon in politics was stressed re-

cently by former US president Jimmy Carter when he voiced his concerns over the increasing merging of religion and state in the Bush administration, and the element of fundamentalism in the White House. Carter sees traits of religious fundamentalists are also applicable to neo-conservatives: "... they are led by authoritarian males who consider themselves superior to others; they believe the past is better than the present; they draw distinctions between themselves, as true believers, and others; those who oppose their position are seen as evil; ... their self-definitions are narrow and restricted; they isolate themselves; ... they view negotiation and efforts to resolve differences as signs of weakness ...", Carter writes.

There seems to be a major conflict between, on the one hand, the hard-liners or conservatives, and on the other the progressives. Is this a typical phenomenon of today's world?

KA: The United States is not alone in this. There is a new intolerance and aggression in Europe too as well as in Muslim countries and the Middle East. Culture is always – and has always been – contested. There are always people who have a different view of their country and are ready to fight for it. American Christian fundamentalists are not in favour of democracy; and it is true that many of the Neo-Cons, many of whom incline towards this fundamentalism, have very hardline, limited views. These are dangerous and difficult times and when people are frightened they tend to retreat into ideological ghettos and build new barriers against the "other."

Democracy is really what religious people call "a state of grace." It is an ideal that is rarely achieved, that has constantly to be reaffirmed, lest it be lost. And it is very difficult to fulfil. We are all – Americans and Europeans – falling short of the democratic ideal during the so-called "war against terror."

SI: Could you expand on the political reasons causing the growing divide between Muslim and Western societies?

KA: In the Middle East, modernization has been impeded by the Arab/Israeli conflict, which has become symbolic to Christian, Jewish and Muslim fundamentalists and is the bleeding heart of the problem. Unless a just political solution can be found that is satisfactory to everybody, there is no hope of peace. There is also the problem of oil, which has made some of these countries

the target of Western greed. In the West, in order to preserve our strategic position and cheap oil supply, we have often supported rulers – such as the shahs of Iran, the Saudis and, initially, Saddam Hussein – who have established dictatorial regimes which suppressed any normal opposition. The only place where people felt free to express their distress has been the mosque.

The modern world has been very violent. Between 1914 and 1945, 70 million people died in Europe as a result of war. We should not be surprised that modern religion has become violent too; it often mimics the violence preached by secular politicians. Most of the violence and terror that concerns us in the Muslim world has grown up in regions where warfare, displacement and conflict have been traumatic and have even become chronic: the Middle East, Palestine, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kashmir.

SI: You have said that for Muslims the Arab-Israeli conflict has become "a symbol of their impotence in the modern world". Could you explain?

KA: The Arab-Israeli conflict began, on both sides, as a purely secular conflict about a land. Zionism began as a rebellion against religious Judaism and at the outset most Orthodox rabbis condemned Zionism as a blasphemous secularization of the Land of Israel, one of the most sacred symbols of Judaism. Similarly, the ideology of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) was secular – many of the Palestinians, of course, are Christian. But, unfortunately, the conflict was allowed to fester; on both sides the conflict became sacralized and, therefore, far more difficult to sort out.

In most fundamentalist movements, certain issues acquire symbolic value and come to represent everything that is wrong with modernity. In Judaism, the secular state of Israel has inspired every single fundamentalist movement, because it represents so graphically the penetration of the secular ethos into Jewish religious life. Some Jewish fundamentalists are passionately for the state of Israel and see it as sacred and holy; involvement in Israeli politics is a sacred act of *tikkun*, restoration of the world; making a settlement in the occupied territories is also an act of *tikkun* and some believe that it will hasten the coming of the Messiah. But the ultra-Orthodox Jews are often against the state of Israel: some see it as an evil abomination (Jews are supposed to wait for the Messiah to restore a religious state

in the Holy Land) and others regard it as purely neutral and hold aloof from it as far as they can. Many Jews too see Israel as rising phoenix-like out of the ashes of Auschwitz and have found it a way of coping with the *Shoah* [holocaust].

But for many Muslims the plight of the Palestinians represents everything that is wrong with the modern world. The fact that in 1948, 750,000 Palestinians could lose their homes with the apparent approval of the world symbolizes the impotence of Islam in the modern world vis-à-vis the West. The Qur'an teaches that if Muslims live justly and decently, their societies will prosper because they will be in tune with the fundamental laws of the universe. Islam was always a religion of success, going from one triumph to another, but Muslims have been able to make no headway against the secular West and the plight of the Palestinians epitomizes this impotence. Jerusalem is also the third holiest place in the Islamic world, and when Muslims see their sacred shrines on the Haram al-Sharif [the Noble Sanctuary, also known as Temple Mount] surrounded by the towering Israeli settlements and feel that their holy city is slipping daily from their grasp, this symbolizes their beleaguered identity. However, it is important to note that the Palestinians only adopted a religiously articulated ideology relatively late – long after Islamic fundamentalism had become a force in countries such as Egypt or Pakistan. Their resistance movement remained secular in ethos until the first Intifada in 1987. And it is also important to note that Hamas, for example, is very different from a movement like Al-Qaeda, which has global ambitions. Hamas is a resistance movement; it does not attack Americans or British but concentrates on attacking the occupying power. It is yet another instance of "fundamentalism" as a religious form of nationalism.

The Arab-Israeli conflict has also become pivotal to Christian fundamentalists in the United States. The Christian Right believes that unless the Jews are in their land, fulfilling the ancient prophecies, Christ cannot return in glory in the Second Coming. So they are passionate Zionists, but this ideology is also anti-Semitic, because in the Last Days they believe that the Antichrist will massacre the Jews in the Holy Land if they do not accept baptism.

SI: Do you see the West as having a responsibility for what is happening in Palestine?

KA: Western people have a responsibility for everybody who is suffering in the world. We are among the richest and most powerful countries and cannot morally or religiously stand by and witness poverty, dispossession or injustice, whether that is happening in Palestine, Kashmir, Chechnya or Africa. But Western people have a particular responsibility for the Arab-Israeli situation. In the Balfour Declaration (1917), Britain approved of a Jewish homeland in Palestine and ignored the aspirations and plight of the native Palestinians. And today the United States supports Israel economically and politically and also tends to ignore the plight of the Palestinians. This is dangerous, because the Palestinians are not going to go away and unless a solution is found that promises security to the Israelis and gives political independence and security to the dispossessed Palestinians, there is no hope for world peace.

SI: *You have also stressed the importance of a "triple vision" – the ability to view the conflict from the perspective of the Islamic, Jewish and Christian communities. Could you explain this view?*

KA: The three religions of Abraham – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – can and should be viewed as one religious tradition that went in three different directions. I have always tried to see them in this way; none is superior to any of the others. Each has its own particular genius; each its own particular flaws. Jews, Christians and Muslims worship the same God and share the same moral values. In the book *A History of God*, I tried to show that throughout their history, Jews, Christians and Muslims have asked the same kind of questions about God and have come up with remarkably similar solutions – so that there are Jewish and Muslim versions of the incarnation, for example, and very similar notions of prophecy. In *The Battle for God*, I tried to show how similar the fundamentalist movements are in all three faiths.

Jews, however, have always found it difficult to accept the later faiths of Christianity and Islam; Christianity has always had an uneasy relationship with Judaism, the parent faith, and has seen Islam as a blasphemous imitation of revelation. The Qur'an, however, has a positive view of both Judaism and Christianity and constantly asserts that Muhammad did not come to cancel out the faiths of "the People of the Book". You cannot be a Muslim unless you

also revere the prophets Abraham, David, Noah, Moses and Jesus, whom the Muslims regard as a prophet, as in fact do many of the New Testament writers. Luke's gospel calls Jesus a prophet from start to finish; the idea that Jesus was divine was a later development, often misunderstood by Christians.

Unfortunately, however, religious people like to see themselves as having a monopoly of truth; they see that they alone are the one true faith. But this is egotism and has nothing to do with true religion, which is about the abandonment of the ego.

SI: *Quite often it seems that religious people are not necessarily more compassionate, tolerant, peaceful or more spiritual than others. What does that say about the purpose of religion?*

KA: The world religions all insist that the one, single test of any type of faith is that it must show practical compassion. They have nearly all developed a version of the Golden Rule: "Do not do to others what you would not have done to you." This demands that we look into our own hearts, discover what it is that gives us pain and then refuse, under any circumstances, to inflict that pain on anybody else. Compassion demands that we "feel with" the other; that we dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and put another there. This is the bedrock message of the Qur'an, and the New Testament: ("I can have faith that moves mountains," says St Paul, "but if I lack charity it profits me nothing."). Rabbi Hillel, a contemporary of Jesus, defined the Golden Rule as the essence of Judaism; everything else, he said, was "commentary." We have exactly the same teaching in Confucianism, Daoism, Hinduism and Buddhism. I have tried to show this in one of my most recent books, *The Great Transformation*.

The traditions all insist that it is not enough simply to show compassion to your own group. You must have what the Chinese call *jian ai*, concern for everybody. Or as Jewish law puts it: "Honour the stranger." "Love your enemies," said Jesus. If you simply love your own kind, this is purely self-interest and a form of group egotism. The traditions also insist that it is the daily, hourly practice of compassion – not the adoption of the correct "beliefs" or the correct sexuality – that will bring us into the presence of what is called God, Nirvana, Brahman or the Dao. Religion is thus inseparable from altruism.

So why aren't religious people compassionate? What does that say about them? Compassion is not a popular virtue. Many religious people prefer to be *right* rather than compassionate. They don't want to give up their egos. They want religion to give them a little mild uplift once a week so that they can return to their ordinary selfish lives, unscathed by the demands of their tradition. Religion is hard work; not many people do it well. But are secularists any better? Many secularists would subscribe to the compassionate ideal but are just as selfish as religious people. The failure of religious people to be compassionate doesn't tell us something about *religion* but about *human nature*. Religion is a method: you have to put it into practice to discover its truth. Not many people do, unfortunately.

## Islam and the West

SI: *Discussing Western ideas of justice and democracy in the Middle East, British foreign correspondent of **The Independent** newspaper, Robert Fisk, put it like this: "We keep on saying that Arabs ... would like some of our shiny, brittle democracy, that they'd like freedom from the secret police and freedom from the dictators – who we largely put there. But they would also like freedom from us. And they want justice, which is sometimes more important than 'democracy'".*

*Does the West need to realize that Muslims can run a modern state, but it is perhaps not the kind of democracy we want to see?*  
KA: As Muslim intellectuals made clear, Islam is quite compatible with democracy but, unfortunately, democracy has acquired a bad name in many Muslim countries. The West says: we believe in freedom and democracy, but *you* have to be ruled by dictators like the shahs or Saddam Hussein. There are double standards. Robert Fisk is right; when I was in Pakistan recently and quoted Mr Bush: "They hate our freedom!", the whole audience roared with laughter.

Democracy cannot be imposed by armies and tanks. The modern spirit has two essential ingredients; if these are not present, no matter how many fighter jets, computers or sky scrapers you have, your country is not really "modern". The first of these is *independence*. The modernization of Europe from 16th to the 20th centuries was punctuated by declarations of independence on all fronts: religious, intellectual, political, economic. People demanded freedom to think, invent, and create as they

chose. The second quality is *innovation* – as we modernized in the West. We are always creating something new; there is a dynamism and excitement to the process.

But in the Muslim world, modernity did not come with independence but with colonial subjugation. And Muslims are not free because Western powers often control their politics behind the scenes to secure the oil supply or other resources. Instead of independence there has been an unhealthy dependence and loss of freedom. Unless people *feel* free, any “democracy” is going to be superficial and flawed.

We also know in our own lives that it is difficult – even impossible – to be creative when we feel under attack. Muslims often feel on the defensive and that makes it difficult to modernize and democratize creatively – especially when there are troops, tanks and occupying forces on the streets.

*SI: Can the Western world and Islam still come together? Do you see any common ground between them?*

KA: This will only be possible if the politi-

cal issues are resolved. There is great common ground between the ideals of Islam and the modern Western ideal and many Muslims have long realized this. At the beginning of the 20th century, almost every single Muslim intellectual was in love with the West and wanted their countries to look just like Britain and France. Some even said that the West was more “Islamic” than the unmodernized Muslim countries, because in their modern economies they were able to come closer to the essential teaching of the Qur’an, which preaches the importance of social justice and equity. At this time, Muslims saw the modern, democratic West as congenial. In 1906, Muslim clerics campaigned alongside secularist intellectuals in Iran for representational government and constitutional rule. When they achieved their goal, the grand Ayatollah said that the new constitution was the next best thing to the coming of the Shiite Messiah, because it would limit the tyranny of the Shah and that was a project worthy of every Muslim. Unfortunately, the British then discovered oil in Iran and never let the new parliament

function freely. Muslims became disenchanted with the West as a result of Western foreign policy: Suez, Israel/Palestine, Western support of corrupt regimes, etc.

*SI: What is needed from a very practical point of view to bridge the gap? What would you advise our leaders, politicians and governments?*

KA: A revised foreign policy: A solution in Israel/Palestine that gives security to the Israelis and justice and autonomy to the Palestinians; no more support of corrupt, dictatorial regimes; a just solution to the unfolding horror in Iraq, which has been a ‘wonderful’ help to groups like Al-Qaeda, playing right into their hands. No more situations like Abu Graib or Guantanamo Bay; money poured into Afghanistan and Palestine; a solution to Kashmir. No more short-term solutions for cheap oil. In Iraq and in Lebanon last summer we saw that our big armies are no longer viable against guerilla and terror attacks. Diplomacy is essential.