

RECLAIMING TRUTH AND RECTIFYING HISTORY: KAREN ARMSTRONG'S RECONSIDERATION OF ISLAM

*Dr. Fares Mohammed Hussein Rashed Al-Shuaibi, Department of English, Radfan,
Faculty of Education, Aden University*

Abstract:

This paper aims at highlighting the intellectual contributions of contemporary Western scholars towards a reevaluation of Islam as a civilization, a culture, and a heritage. The paper focuses attention on Karen Armstrong as an exemplary voice in the debates about Islam and Western modernity. Armstrong offers a nuanced understanding of Islam, calling for a fair appraisal of Islam and an alliance of civilizations. Her work yields useful insights into contemporary concerns as they unfold, particularly in relation to Islam's alleged relationship to violence.

Keywords: *Islam, compassion, alliance of civilizations, unity, fundamentalism.*

1. Introduction:

Karen Armstrong, born in Worcestershire (1944), is a British historian of religions and a former Catholic nun. A “freelance monotheist,” Armstrong stresses the importance of human unity and interfaith. Her contributions include *Through the Narrow Gate* (1982), *The First Christian: Saint Paul's Impact on Christianity* (1983), *Beginning the World* (1983), *A History of God: from Abraham to the Present* (1993), *The Battle for God* (2000), *Faith After September 11* (2002), *Muhammad: A Prophet For Our Time* (2006), *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions* (2006), *The Bible: A Biography* (2007). Under the banner of the “quest for God,” Armstrong traces a deep network of similar attributes that characterize human history in its entirety. As will be discussed below, in almost every argument she raises, there is a strident accent on the common issues of religions despite superficial differences.

Compassion is the platform for Armstrong's investigation of religious traditions. Defined as “an ability to see sacredness in every single human being, and a willingness to take practical care of the more vulnerable members of society,” compassion, from her perspective, is the sine-qua-non of religious experience (*Battle* xiv). It is the central core element that stimulates humanity to collect its fragments and to connect them beyond all narrow sectarian imperatives. Lack of compassion, however, is at the root of the present atmosphere of antagonism. Armstrong sees in this absence the failure of humanity to realize the ultimate meanings of religious traditions and the triumph of “theologies of rage, resentment, and revenge” that “hijack” religion, promote hatred and conflict, and know no language but “murder” (*ibid* 366).

In *Islam: A Short History* (2000), Armstrong advances her foundational claim for “the disinterested love of truth and the respect for the sacred rights of others that characterize both Islam and Western society at their best” (191). The book covers the major incidents that occur with the advent of Islam, and provides a rich source of Islamic worldviews and their larger implications for the Muslim world. As a detailed history of the journey of this religion into the stage of the world and the different formative moments that contribute to its current state, the book also attempts to portray Islam in an image totally different from the Western long-held prejudices and biased misconceptions. As will be shown below, Armstrong's book *Islam* addresses various themes such as religious tolerance, rights of woman, religious interdependence, and war in Islam.

Armstrong scrutinizes Islamic principles and foregrounds their significance to understanding the

modes of activity of the traditional mindset. In an intensive engagement with cultural components, she reflects on these principles and delineates their relevance to the requirements of the contemporary world. Her representations of Islam are also rich with meanings that stand eloquent testimony to the fact that the Islamic vision is crucial for the health of any human collectivity.

Islam and the West is a major highlight for Armstrong. This issue captures the centrality of her discussions, and takes on several dimensions. Guided by the intent to “build bridges and avert the possibility of future battles” (Armstrong, *Battle* 368), she exerts efforts to map areas of similarity and difference between Islam and the West. In terms of similarity, she draws on the residual history of the nexus of Islam and the West, and displays how this history is replete with examples of religious harmony and cooperation. On the contrary, the difference that mars the dominant history of the relationship of Islam and the West, as she makes it clear, arises out of narrow ideological fabrications in history. This difference is charged with the language of exclusion, hatred, and violence.

To present a just image of Islam in lieu of the prevalent spirit of hostility is Armstrong's chief concern. Guided by the principle of dialogue, she attempts to posit a different projection of Islam from a perspective that is free from stereotypes. In so doing, she aims at lessening the conflict-ridden culture of today and at promoting better understanding across cultures as a corner stone for a peaceful existence for all the citizens of the world. She notes:

To cultivate a distorted image of Islam, to view it as inherently the enemy of democracy and decent values, and to revert to the bigoted views of the medieval Crusaders would be a catastrophe. Not only will such an approach antagonize the 1.2 billion Muslims with whom we share the world, but it will also violate the disinterested love of truth and respect for the sacred rights of others that characterize both Islam and Western society at their best. (*Islam* 191)

Her work aims to heal the wound-ridden history and to weigh more on the side of the all-embracing dialogue beyond conflicting differences and narrow ideological parameters.

In Armstrong's attempt to arrive at a fair understanding of Islamic civilization and achievements, she conducts in-depth acts of analysis of some of the foundational premises of Islam that are often misrepresented, or misinterpreted, by a number of Western intelligentsia. Prominent are questions like the relationship of Islam and the West, Islamic culture, status of woman, and so-called Muslim fundamentalism. The following sections provided addresses the ways that Armstrong understands and tackles such elements of critical controversy.

2. Islam and the West

The numerous facets of the relationship between Islam and the West found a fertile ground for research in Armstrong. She examines the different phases of this relationship and expounds on the factors that amount to its manifold facets in history. Basically, this history has two faces: residual and dominant. Each face of this history impinges on the relation and takes it on a categorically different trajectory.

The residual history is one of shared grounds of understanding and mutual respect. Armstrong shows how religious traditions like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam originate from the same roots of monotheism and share many fundamental principles that connect and compel them to develop more ties of intimacy: “Islam had been born in the religious pluralism of the Middle East, where the various faiths had coexisted for centuries” (*Muhammad* 22). She also explains how Islam is in continuity with its predecessors. “The Koran,” she writes, “does not condemn other religious traditions as false or incomplete but shows each new prophet as confirming and continuing the insights of his predecessors” (“Unity” 177). She also foregrounds moments when these traditions join one another in acts of celebration and construction of the human civilization. Reflecting on how religious practices unite communities and deepen the compassionate atmosphere of their times, Armstrong notes: “Muhammad had been greatly excited by the prospect of working closely with the Jewish tribes, and had ... introduced some practices

(such as communal prayer on Friday afternoons, when Jews would be preparing for the Sabbath, and a fast on the Jewish Day of Atonement)" (*Islam* 17).

Such moments in history extend grounds of respect and admiration. Armstrong explains how the Muslim civilization had helped Europe to reconstitute itself after the "long trauma of the Dark Ages by reacquainting [the Europeans] with the philosophical, scientific, and mathematical heritage of ancient Greece" (Foreword xiii). She also shows how Muslim Spain was a centre of learning wherein "European scholars were sitting at the feet of Muslim scholars" to quench the European thirst of the knowledge that was compiled and constructed by Muslims (*ibid*). This formative period in the history of the Western civilization, according to Armstrong, displays how the residual history of the relationship of Islam and the West is pregnant with rare meanings and lofty instances of cooperation and constructive ties.

In addition to its past roots, the residual history has repercussions and rhythms in recent times. Armstrong remarks:

At the beginning of the twentieth century, almost every single Muslim intellectual was in love with the West. They wanted their countries to look like Britain and France, at that time the leaders of secular, democratic modernity. Some even went so far as to say that the Europeans were better Muslims than the Muslims themselves, because their modernized societies approached the egalitarian ideals of the Quran more closely than anything that prevailed in traditional, Islamic countries. (Foreword xi)

Western modernity with its accent on the rights of individuals, democracy, freedom of expression, intellectual development, and cultural openness appeals to a galaxy of Muslim intelligentsia as principles that are profoundly congruent with the broad visions of Islam. Armstrong points out how such Muslim thinkers go in expressing their admiration for such Western ideals and aspiring to promote them in the Muslim world. Western modernity, as she notes, stimulates the Arab and Muslim minds to see resemblances and commonalities as a force to chart a fresh beginning with the West (*ibid*).

On account of the fact that "there was an anti-Muslim backlash in some Western countries" (*Muhammad* 13), Armstrong elucidates that this antagonism feeds into the relationship of Islam and the West. Saturated in hatred and violence, the dominant history results from an emphasis on differences as the exclusive criterion for defining relations. The exclusive emphasis on differences constructs barriers to understanding 'the Other', and blurs all visions that see possibilities of mutual respect at the heart of a sound, solid relationship. In such a modality of thought, 'the Other' is approached as a potential source of threat to the self and, therefore, prospects of conflict decide the nature and direction of this relationship.

In *Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet* (2008), Armstrong designates the roots of the conflict-ridden relationship as also stemming from ideologically-constructed misrepresentations. As she points out, "In the Middle Ages, Christians had been able to see Islam only as a failed version of Christianity, and had created myths to show that Muhammad had been instructed by a heretic" (34). Such misrepresentation of Islam as a "fanatical faith that encourages murder and terror" (12), of the Holy Koran as "the most boring book in the world" (38), and of Prophet Mohammed as "the antithesis of the religious spirit and as the enemy of decent civilization" (44), as her argument runs, deepen the gap and promote animosity. Armstrong also notes that such ideologically motivated misrepresentations result in "the alienation of the Muslim world;" precisely owing to "its gradual discovery of the hostility and contempt for their Prophet and their religion" (38).

Armstrong contends that one cause of this difference results from later intellectual perspectives that speak categorically divergent discourses. The later insistence on Western "logos" and Islamic "mythos" as cultural paradigms characteristic of each is a significant factor in dramatizing the conflict and drawing them largely apart. Each epistemological paradigm operates in a different fashion of thought and guides its subjects to develop fixed ways of seeing reality that bear no relevance or pay no heed to the possibilities of other outlooks on life. This exclusiveness of perspectives, therefore, is tantamount to

frustrating any bridge-building processes.

Armstrong touches on such European experiences as colonialism, Suez, and the Arab-Israeli conflict as “disasters” that “corrode into hatred” (“Now” 3). The oppression inflicted on the Muslim world and the atrocities of the experiences, in her reading, feed into more acts of attack and retaliation (ibid). That is, the Western exploitation of and hegemony over the Muslim world strangle any ray of hope in the life of such a relationship.

3. Islam's Cultural Formations

In her attempt to refute the claims made against Islam as a terror-spawning culture, Armstrong makes the observation: “The very word *Islam*, which denotes the existential 'surrender' of the whole being to God which Muslims are required to make, is related to *salam*, 'peace'” (*Muhammad* 14). She also reads into the biography of Prophet Mohammed (peace and blessings be upon him) as the harbinger of peace, whose mission is to “stop [all kinds] of discriminate slaughter” (ibid). And to reflect on the acts of terror that are committed by some Muslim fundamentalist groups, she writes: “It was particularly painful to me that the terrorists believed that they were following in the footsteps of the Prophet Muhammad” (ibid 13). Such terrorist activities, according to her, “hijack the biography of Muhammad and twist it to suit their own ends” (ibid 14). In response to such terrorist distortion of the meanings of Islam, Armstrong states:

We can learn from Muhammad how to make peace. His whole career shows that the first priority must be to extirpate greed, hatred and contempt from our own hearts and to reform our own society. Only then is it possible to build a safe, stable world, where people can live together in harmony, and respect each other's differences. (ibid 15)

Armstrong describes Islamic culture as essentially conservative. Conservative cultures, as she explains, flourish in agrarian societies whose resources depend mainly on growing crops and harvesting lands. Two aspects are prominent in conservative cultures vis-à-vis promoting conformist mentalities (*Battle* 34). First, communal welfare, she writes, takes precedence over individual gains. Owing to the limitations of their lives, individuals are in need to collaborate together and organize their efforts to fall into the collective benefit. Therefore, “social stability and order” are “more important than freedom of expression” (ibid). The conservative culture attaches more weight to the continuity and overall order of the community. That is, individual innovative acts or forms of experimentation that may collide with or cast aspersions over the established order of mind enjoy little receptivity in such a conformist culture. Secondly, Armstrong underlines the role of “myth and rituals” in keeping intact all social formations of the conservative culture. The mythological background of the conservative mode of existence, she observes, creates “a cast of mind that adapts and conforms to the way things are” (ibid 35). As crucial cultural components, myth and rituals unite members of the *umma* 'community', strengthen their ties of solidarity, link individuals with the past, and confer the atmosphere of home upon the overall cultural outlook.

Armstrong also sees in the Islamic conservative culture the seeds of “dynamic” worldviews that cross the borders of the “static” and motivate its subjects to emerge as active participants in the construction of the various walks of life. “Throughout Muslim history,” she writes, “there were movements of *islah* (“reform”) and *tajdid* (“renewal”), which were often quite revolutionary” (ibid 40). She cites several thinkers and religious leaders who endeavour to “rinse the minds” of later “theological accretions” and hark back to “pristine Islam” (ibid 45). She mentions Ibn Taymiyyah (1263-1328), Ahmad ibn Idris (1780-1836), Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-92), et al. Armstrong discusses how this religion is not “static and fatalistic,” but is open to accommodate changes and inspires “great cultural and political achievements” (ibid 59).

Armstrong regards the Islamic culture as a culture of celebration. Islam: “a joyful message of hope” that radically transforms the culture of people into one of openness, activity, and achievement (“Unity” 165). Islam inspires individuals to cross all borders and move forward towards constructing a community of “brotherhood and social justice” (Armstrong, ibid 183). It also stimulates them to “redeem

humanity from oppression and injustice” and to become harbingers of peace and noble morals (ibid 186). With all this, Muslims are motivated to celebrate life in its abundance as a manifestation of divine blessing and a mark of their gratitude to God. The “Koran urges Muslims to see the world as an epiphany; they must make the imaginative effort to see *through* the fragmentary world to the full power of original being, to the transcendent reality that infuses all things” (ibid 167).

Unity is the “God of Islam” which expresses the wholeness and integrity of the communal and the personal (ibid 182). Armstrong describes how unity effectively operates at all levels in the Muslim collectivity. She explains how, for instance, *zakat* ‘paying a certain amount of money to the needy’, Ramadhan fast, and *hajj* ‘pilgrimage’ reflect not only a powerful experience of community but also the absence of such divides as classist and racist prejudices (*Battle* 37). Unity, as she displays, is the underlying dynamic that connects the various activities and unleashes an intense religious experience. The singularity of the Islamic meaning of unity, Armstrong affirms, is that it takes into consideration both the peculiarity of the individual experience and the collective interest as epitomes of the “Islamic spirituality” (“Unity” 182). This spirituality is, thus, a culmination of the complementary nature of Muslim acts both as an individual and a member of the larger *ummah* ‘collectivity’.

3.1. Ideals of Islam

In her deliberate consideration of Islam, Armstrong pays considerable attention to the egalitarian ideals and morals this religion instills in the hearts and minds of its subjects. She sheds special light on areas that are often misinterpreted or lack in due attention. She attempts to re-present these ideals as they occur in the modality of the Islamic thought itself, and introduces them to the West which is in the dark of such realities of this religion.

Principal among Islamic ideals is the emphasis on justice. Armstrong notes that the “chief duty” of Muslims is “to create a just community in which all members, even the most weak and vulnerable” are “treated with absolute respect” (*Islam* xi). This stress on evolving a society free of oppression and tyranny commands top priority in “the religion of al-Allah” and motivates Muslims to participate in fulfilling this ideal. Armstrong also displays how this virtue creates a “compassionate ethos” that fosters a healthy community crowned with “egalitarianism” (“Unity” 183). The Islamic accent on social justice leaves no place for classist, racist, or sexist biases to shake communal foundations, but rather implants a well-structured community that has “the hallmark of the more advanced religions” (ibid).

Furthermore, Armstrong foregrounds religious tolerance as part and parcel of “the religion of al-Allah.” In addition to the fact that “there is to be ‘no compulsion in religion’” (ibid 182), she writes that Islam comes in the monotheistic tradition and continues to promote its message. That is, Islam is a continuation of the revelation; because, it acts as a “reminder” of the religious facets of truth that are familiar to one and all. This truth is of the “primordial faith” that is preached to all humanity by the “prophets of the past” (*Islam* 8). She remarks that the “Koran does not condemn other religious traditions as false or incomplete but shows each new prophet as confirming and continuing the insights of his predecessors” (“Unity” 177). This stress on the “continuity of the religious experience of mankind,” as she continues to note, is further substantiated by the fact that “Muslims insist that if Muhammad had known about Hindus and Buddhists, he would have included their religious sages: after his death they were allowed full religious liberty in the Islamic empire” (ibid). In this regard, Armstrong sees it crucial to accentuate the religious tolerance of Islam on the grounds that “tolerance is not a virtue that many Western people today would feel inclined to attribute to Islam” (ibid).

Armstrong observes that history has a special meaning in the context of Islam. The past is not merely a matter of sheer remembrance, nor is it something to be haphazardly visited on occasions: “A Muslim would meditate upon the current events of his time and upon past history as a Christian would contemplate an icon, using the creative imagination to discover the hidden divine kernel . . . one of the chief characteristics of Islam has been its sacralization of history” (*Islam* xii). This “sacralization of history” is

of a twofold advantage: glorifying the divine and learning from history. Muslims reflect on the past to see the grandeur and wisdom of their Creator and, at the same time, to derive lessons for the present and the future. The past is replete with examples of individuals who invite divine reward or retribution owing to their deeds. The past provides Muslims with morals that can guide them to lead better lives. For Muslims, reflection on the past is an opportunity to engage with the behaviour of the time. Against this background Armstrong explains the interest Muslims have in history, and connects it to the essential elements requisite for the structure of any healthy community (ibid).

3.2. War in Islam

In contrast to the stereotypes perpetuated against Islam as a theology of violence and bloodshed, Armstrong advances a different discourse that hinges primarily on the justification and conduct of war in Islam:

In the West, Muhammad has often been presented as a warlord, who forced Islam on a reluctant world by force of arms. The reality was quite different. Muhammad was fighting for his life, was evolving a theology of the just war in the Koran with which most Christians would agree, and never forced anybody to convert to his religion. Indeed the Koran is clear that there is to be 'no compulsion in religion'. In the Koran war is held to be abhorrent; the only just war is a war of self-defence. ("Unity" 182)

As stated above, war is essentially abhorred in Islam; coercion is not an Islamic strategy to spread this religion. The justification of war in Islam, as Armstrong points out, is self-defence. Only on this ground war is permitted to safeguard the community and protect its boundaries against external invasions. She characterizes such motive for waging wars as "just" and justified by other traditions, too.

Armstrong highlights the moral conduct of the "just war" in Islam. She underlines the fact that in the self-defending war, Islam "strongly prohibits the killing of innocent civilians" (*Islam* 190). Non-combatants are not targets for the Muslim warriors. War is waged only against warriors who attack Muslims and cause their bloodshed. Armstrong also refers to the fact that "the Koran ... says you must limit war and you must stop hostilities as soon as the enemy sues for peace" ("Journal" 12). This morally informed perspective on the conduct of war is what Islam essentially inculcates in the hearts and minds of its followers. To wage war under the banner of Islam necessitates implementing the ethics of war as indicated in the Koran and exemplified in the prophetic tradition.

3.3. Rights of Woman

In her critical exploration of Islamic civilization, Armstrong designates the status of women in Islam as a project of "emancipation" (*Islam* 16). Not only does Islam liberate women from the shackles and ill-treatment of the pre-Islamic era, but it also accords them rights of "inheritance and divorce," and regards women as equals to men in terms of "duties and responsibilities" (ibid). This religion provides women with enough spaces to take part in all walks of life and to enjoy a high status as active social elements in the Muslim community (ibid).

Unlike the stereotypical representations of Islam as an "oppressive religion" that suppresses women and views them as objects in the hands of men, Armstrong states that the reality of this religion is totally different from such misrepresentations. The veiling of women or locking them in houses, as she states, is not essential to the Islamic parameters: "The Quran prescribes some degree of segregation and veiling for the Prophet's wives, but there is nothing in the Quran that requires the veiling of *all* women or their seclusion in a separate part of the house" (ibid). In addition, Armstrong grapples with polygamy in Islam and clarifies the conditions of its justification. She shows how polygamy is first legitimated in Islam as a means to protect women who lost their husbands during wars. Though allowable, polygamy is framed by "absolute equality" among wives and showing "no sign of favouring one rather than the other" (ibid). Equality among wives is a prerequisite for polygamy and any act of violating this condition renders polygamy a sheer form of oppression. This restriction guarantees for the woman her dignity and right as a

human being.

In depicting the patriarchal practices of some Muslims, Armstrong exposes such practices as customs that are developed four centuries after the Prophet's death. These customs, she continues to stress, result from the Muslims' imitation of the "Greek Christians of Byzantine" (ibid 16). Though foreign to pristine Islam, male repressive practices continue to culturally inform the succeeding generations and to affect the status of women as forms of outrage. Such ill-practices, Armstrong believes, misrepresent the true broad-mindedness of Islam, "hijack the faith and bring it into line with the prevailing patriarchy" (ibid).

3.4. Fundamentalism

In an interview administered by Steve Paulson (2009), Armstrong expresses her views about fundamentalism as a universal phenomenon. Fundamentalism, as she states, is not culture-specific, but is rather a set of ideologies that pervades the world in response to the unprecedented revolutionary culture of the scientific and secular modernity ("Going" 6). The "dismissive or even cruel" culture of secularism, as she elaborates, undermines the roots of religious structures and threatens its foundations. Such a menace amounts to an eruption of "all kinds of perverse and twisted forms" that adopt ideologies of hatred, exclusion, and violence against everything other than itself (ibid).

Islamic fundamentalism, in Armstrong's perspective, is a consequence of the world fundamentalist movements. In *The Case for God* (2010), she writes:

The defensive piety popularly known as 'fundamentalism' erupted in almost every major faith during the twentieth century. In their desire to produce a wholly rational, scientific faith that abolished *mythos* in favour of *logos*, Christian fundamentalists have interpreted scripture with a literalism that is unparalleled in the history of religion. In the United States, Protestant fundamentalists have evolved an ideology known as 'creation science', which regards the *mythoi* of the Bible as scientifically accurate. They have, therefore, campaigned against the teaching of evolution in the public schools, because it contradicts the creation story in the first chapter of Genesis. (7)

As a result of the "profound assault" of secularism that repudiates religious traditions and marginalizes its voice in the construction of the world, Muslim extremism, as she argues, erupts and develops counter-ideologies that are designed to safeguard the boundaries of religion ("Journal" 13). Furthermore, the Muslim world does not take enough time to culturally translate this transformation into forms intelligible to them. The rapid and radical change that secularism espouses does not sink in or gradually trickle down in the minds of Muslims. The Muslim world is forced to fast assimilate a new culture that is drastically revolutionary to the established worldviews. Elaborating on this point, she refers to Ataturk's attempt to modernize Turkey by closing down the "Madrassas" and forcing people to "wear western clothes" (ibid). In Iran, the Shahs "used to make their soldiers go out with their bayonets, taking off the women's veils in the streets, and ripping them to pieces in front of them" (ibid). Egypt, as Armstrong points out, is yet another instance of how religion is repressed in the wake of secular modernity. She also shows how the most virulent forms of Sunni fundamentalism develop in the concentration camps and to which "President Nasser had entered thousands of members of the Muslim Brotherhood without trial" (ibid). It is the "lethal assault" of secularism, in Armstrong's views, that causes the emergence of such unhealthy forms of thought.

Considering the 9/11 attacks as ramifications of the theologies of fundamentalism, Armstrong sees such terrorist acts as the most "flagrant and wicked abuse of religion" (*Islam* 190). As an "embattled faith," fundamentalism distorts the image of religion, sows the seeds of destruction, promotes antagonism and conflict, and annihilates humanity (*Battle* 368). That is to say, the fundamentalist attacks incur the interrogation of the very Islamic principles, cause split within the Muslim community, and further cultural destabilizations:

Today many Muslims and Westerners regard one another with deep distrust. After the atrocities of September 11, many in the West have come to believe that, as Samuel P. Huntington had predicted, there is indeed a clash of civilizations because their religion renders Muslims unfit for modernity. Many are convinced that “Islam” somehow compels Muslims to commit acts of terror and violence, that it applauds suicide bombers, and that it is inherently incompatible with liberal, Western democracy. (Armstrong, Foreword xii)

However, Armstrong proposes a different perspective on the solution to extremism. Instead of the suppressive strategies, which are usually adopted in confronting fundamentalist thought, she underlines the need to “learn to see, perhaps, the pain that lies at the root of a lot of this [thought] because [fundamentalists] feel attacked by us” (“Journal” 12). She sees the intellectual task to “learn to decode fundamentalist rhetoric ... see the hidden agendas” as crucial to internalizing the life-force of this thought and initiating dialogue (ibid). This proposal moves beyond the current language of intimidation that breeds further violence and instability. Armstrong's point of departure is critical; it commences with a self-reflexive act and moves to embrace 'the Other' beyond all prefabricated boundaries. It is a vision of dialogue beyond difference.

4. Conclusion

Armstrong has a far-reaching philosophy that transcends narrow sectarian imperatives and crystallizes a unity of humanity in all multitude. It is a vision that dismantles barriers and knows no borders to the larger empire of the human. It is a “unanimous vision” of the “alliance of civilizations” that connects human fragments, orchestrates its rhythms into symphonies of shared meanings and common grounds of understanding and mutual respect, and uplifts one and all to a stage of realizing the urge to “join hands together to stop the kind of cruelty, violence and obscenity, moral obscenity that we saw on September the 11th” (Armstrong, “Now” 5). Armstrong's ardent faith in compassion is the first step in the process for such a vision in order to see the broad light of the day. To see “sacredness” in every single human being is to perceive the profound meaning of human life, to appreciate the other point of view, and to transcend the self and embrace 'the Other'. Armstrong's reading of Islam is a crucial step for accomplishing such a vision. In the face of the countless acts of misreading this religion, disorientating public attitudes and perceptions, and deepening wounds, she articulates an alternative voice that recognizes Islam as a culture profoundly interested in establishing a just human civilization. She displays how this religion is a life-affirming celebration of humanity. She also brings out elements of the residual history of the relationship of Islam and the West that stand eloquent testimony to the Islamic deep concern for a wider web of interconnected issues of harmony and collaboration. Armstrong exhibits aspects of Islamic history that are often repressed. Her pronouncements seek to counteract the prevalent atmosphere of hatred against this religion. She also sponsors a call to Western intellectuals to revise their readings of; and attitudes towards; Islamic worldviews, and to develop a fair appraisal instead.

If Muslims need to understand our Western traditions and institutions more thoroughly today, we in the West need to divest ourselves of some of our old prejudices. Perhaps one place to start is with the figure of Muhammad: a complex, passionate man who sometimes did things that it is difficult for us to accept, but who had genius of a profound order and founded a religion and a cultural tradition that was not based on the sword— despite the Western myth — and whose name 'Islam' signifies peace and reconciliation. (Armstrong, *Muhammad* 266)

Underlying Armstrong's delineation of the relationship between Islam and the West is a profound vision that locates tension in the accent on difference and its associated ramifications of fear and violence. The difference that pervades the atmosphere of this relationship— religion, ideology, outlook, etc. projects the unknown 'Other' as a threat to the self (Armstrong, “Now” 1). This threat caused by the presence of some alien 'Other' necessitates self-preservation and promotes hatred, exclusion, and violence towards

everything of, by, and, for 'the Other'. Violence breeds violence, and atrocities lead to attacks and counter-attacks (ibid). Armstrong sees this narrowly sectarian discourse and the absence of genuine dialogue as the source of conflict that escalates with the passage of time.

My paper has highlighted the fact that Armstrong's representation of Islam is informed by its foundational texts. She offers a serious engagement with the Koran and the Prophet's tradition and weaves the threads of her argument with verses and citations that capture the essence of this religion. She also displays the spirit of a disinterested scholar whose mission is a quest for truth. In citing Koranic texts, for instance, Armstrong does not decontextualize verses, nor does she impose a prefabricated reading on them. Rather, her references are profoundly contextualized and bear the essential meanings of the cited verses. In so doing, Armstrong infers what is truly essential to Islam and confidently proceeds with her work to understand and appreciate this religion unaffected by other antagonistic voices. In her own way, she attempts to counteract the held stereotypes of Islam and urges the need to develop a broad-minded perspective of Islam that is based on understanding its true culture.

To lend concreteness to her arguments, Armstrong invariably draws lines of similarity or demarcation between Islam and Christianity. She takes every occasion to locate attributes of similarity-- "Koran is as central to the spirituality of Islam as Jesus, the Logos, is to Christianity" ("Unity" 164), "Islam ... as happened in Christianity" (*Islam* 16), "Unfortunately, as in Christianity, the religion [Islam] was later hijacked by the men" ("Unity" 184), "Politics is not extrinsic to a Muslim's personal religious life, as in Christianity which mistrusts mundane success" ("Unity" 186), or dissimilarity-- "there are more passages in the Bible than the Quran that are dedicated to violence" ("Going" 5), "If Christians find the Muslims' regard for politics strange, they should reflect that their passion for abstruse theological debate seems equally bizarre to Jews and Muslims" ("Unity" 186), etc. Such concrete examples strengthen Armstrong's discourse and facilitate comprehension. Thus, it is quite clear that Armstrong advances a reevaluation of Islam as a religion, culture, and civilization. In this act of representation, she provides perspectives that are designed to circulate a better understanding of the Muslim world. Her acts of reflection are premised on the need to understand 'the Other' in its own right and to give credit where it is due. This intellectual platform contributes significantly to promoting dialogue across cultures by virtue of celebrating difference, establishing channels of communication, crossing borders, and embracing the Other.

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