

Comments on Karen Armstrong's Book *Islam, a Short History*

January 3, 2015

In the Fall of 2014 I was advised of Karen Armstrong's book *Islam, a Short History*. So I obtained a copy and read through the first part of the book, up to p. 26. I stopped at that point because my focus over the years has been on the time of Muhammad, and that is the period in Islamic history with which I am most familiar; those pages generally corresponded to that time period, and, if they were indicative about the rest of the book, the information on those pages raised some serious issues about the material being presented.

On October 14, 2014, I sent an e-mail to Dr. Armstrong with the comments below. On November 26, 2014, I received an e-mail from Nancy Roberts, "PA to Dr. Armstrong." Ms. Roberts wrote, "I am responding on behalf of Dr. Armstrong to thank you for your observations on *Islam, A Short History*."

There were no other comments in Ms. Roberts' e-mail, so that same day I replied with an e-mail specifically asking if Dr. Armstrong had any comments about my observations. I have not yet received a reply.

If you are considering learning about Islam from the writings of Karen Armstrong, please first consider my comments below.

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Comments:

Tendency to Make Sweeping Claims

Armstrong made sweeping general claims that hopefully she addressed in detail in some other book; e.g.:

1. The "core teaching" of the Koran being that it was wrong to build private fortune, "but good to share wealth and create a society where the weak and the vulnerable were treated with respect." (p. 4)

2. Social Justice was the “crucial virtue of Islam.” (p. 6)

Based on my research over the last six years, using mainly English translations of authoritative Islamic works, including Koran commentaries, I have serious doubts about these claims.

No Compulsion in Islam and Respect for Other Religions

On p. 10 she wrote that there was no compulsion in Islam and the beliefs of Jews and Christians were to be respected,

Hence Muhammad never asked Jews or Christians to accept Islam, unless they particularly wished to do so...

I address this general issue in my book *Letting Islam Be Islam: Separating Truth From Myth*, Chapter 7, “No Compulsion in Islam?” On pp. 127-139 I show that claims such as these made by Armstrong are not supported by Islamic doctrine or history. I am pleased to say that this book of mine received a very positive review in an online publication by the Beirut Islamic University in Lebanon – the review, in Arabic and also translated into English, is at my book’s site on Amazon.com.

Harmony in Medina

On p. 14 Armstrong described Medina under the leadership of Muhammad as a “supertribe” in which the Muslims, pagans and Jews all got along. In reality, the first Medinans to convert to Islam did so because they thought Muhammad was the prophet the Jews were threatening them with, and these Medinans wanted to get on the good side of that prophet first; they also confirmed with Muhammad that this would mean they had to sever their ties with the Jews (see *Letting Islam Be Islam: Separating Truth From Myth*, pp. 336-338, Notes 805-806).

Treatment of Women

On p. 16 Armstrong lauds how well women were treated in early Islam. Again I show the error of this in *Letting Islam Be Islam: Separating Truth From Myth*, Chapter 10, “Sharia Law and Women,” and Chapter 11, “Whom Your Right Hands Possess.”

Anti-Semitism is a Christian Vice

On p. 21 Armstrong wrote:

Anti-semitism is a Christian vice. Hatred of the Jews became marked in the Muslim world only after the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 and the subsequent loss of Arab Palestine.

Once again, I show the inaccuracy of this claim in *Letting Islam Be Islam: Separating Truth From Myth*, Chapter 8, “Three Religions with the Same God?”, especially pp. 153-188.

Abandoning Jihad for a Peaceful Offensive

On p. 22 Armstrong wrote that after defeating the Meccans at the Battle of the Trench (March 627), Muhammad “felt that it was time to abandon the jihad and begin a peaceful offensive.” However, when one looks at a chronology of the Muslim raids and battles, one finds that between March 627 and the conquest of Mecca in January 630, Muhammad ordered the killing of two non-Muslim opponents, and the Muslims engaged in 36 military expeditions against various tribes on the Arabian peninsula (for a summary of this, see p. 166 in my book *Islam According to Muhammad, Not Your Neighbor*; for details of these see pp. 30-41). Not exactly an abandonment of jihad.

The Conquest of Mecca

On p. 23 Armstrong wrote:

...Muhammad took Mecca without shedding a drop of blood.

However, sources Armstrong used or referred to refute this claim. *The Life of Muhammad (Sirat Rasul Allah)*, by Ibn Ishaq is listed in the Notes for this section of Armstrong’s book. Here is what we find in Ibn Ishaq’s book:

1. Pp. 549-550 – A Muslim force under the command of Khalid entered the lower part of Mecca and met resistance. The Meccans lost 12-13 men and the Muslims lost three in the ensuing battle.
2. P. 550 - The apostle had instructed his commanders when they entered Mecca only to fight those who resisted them, except a small number who were to be killed even if they were found beneath the curtains of the Ka’ba.
3. Pp. 550-551 – Here is a list of some of those Muhammad had ordered to be killed. There were nine total, including four women. Four or five of these nine were captured and killed. The others saved themselves by converting to Islam before they could be killed.
4. P. 555 – Shortly after the conquest of Mecca, Muhammad said,

If anyone should say, ‘The apostle killed men in Mecca, say God permitted His apostle to do so but He does not permit you.

That Meccans and Muslims were killed during the conquest of Mecca is even mentioned in one of the books Armstrong listed in her *Suggestions for Further Reading*. The book is *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources*, by Martin Lings:

1. P. 312 – a Meccan force attacked the Muslims lead by Khalid. A battle ensued and about 30 Meccans and two Muslims were killed.

The History of al-Tabari

I was very surprised that Armstrong made no reference, either in her *Notes* or her *Suggestions for Further Reading*, to the multi-volume history written by the 10th century Muslim historian Abu Ja'far Muhammad b. Jarir al-Tabari (even though she had mentioned him on p. 197 among the Key Figures in the History of Islam). Relevant volumes of his work had already been translated into English some years before Armstrong's book was published in 2000.

For killings done in Mecca during the conquest, see *The History of al-Tabari: The Victory of Islam* (published in 1997):

1. Pp. 177-178 – Khalid's battle against the Meccan force and the killing of two Muslims and 12-13 of the Meccans.
2. Pp. 178-181 – Muhammad ordered certain Meccans to be killed if they were captured, and some were killed.

The Wars of Apostasy

With regard to how the Muslims dealt with the Wars of Apostasy (*Riddah Wars*) after Muhammad died, on p. 26 Armstrong wrote this about Abu Bakr, who had succeeded Muhammad:

Abu Bakr quelled the uprisings with wisdom and clemency...

However, in 1993, Volume 10 of al-Tabari's history had been published in English: *The History of al-Tabari: The Conquest of Arabia*. Here is an excerpt about this time period that I wrote on pp. 95-97 in my recent book *Islam According to Muhammad, Not Your Neighbor*, quoting from this volume of al-Tabari:

After Muhammad died there were many Arab tribes that left Islam. This resulted in the Wars of Apostasy (Riddah Wars) under Abu Bakr, the first "Rightly Guided" Caliph. Abu Bakr sent Muslim armies not only against the apostate tribes, but also against Arab tribes that had not been previously conquered during the time of Muhammad. The commander of each army had a letter from Abu Bakr to be read to the people before any non-Muslim tribe was attacked. The letter explained:

I have sent to you someone at the head of an army of the Muhajirun and the Ansar and those who follow [them] in good works. I ordered him not to fight anyone or to kill anyone until he has called him to the cause of God; so that those who respond to him and acknowledge [Him] and renounce [unbelief] and do good works, [my envoy] shall accept him and help him to [do right], but I have ordered him to fight those who deny [Him] for that reason. So he will not spare any one of them he can gain mastery over, [but may] burn them with fire, slaughter them by any means, and take women and children captive; nor shall he accept from anyone anything except Islam.

[*The History of al-Tabari: The Conquest of Arabia*, p. 57]

Abu Bakr even set the example when a captive who had fought against the Muslims was brought to him. Abu Bakr

ordered a fire to be kindled with much firewood in the prayer yard (musalla) of Medina and threw him, with arms and legs bound, into it.

[*The History of al-Tabari: The Conquest of Arabia*, p. 80]

The commander of one of the Muslim armies was Khalid bin al-Walid. Here is a command that Abu Bakr gave to Khalid:

When you encamp someplace, make the call to prayer and the iqamah. Then, if the people make the call to prayer and the iqamah, leave them alone; but if they do not do so, there is no [course] but to raid them. [In that case] kill them by every means, by fire or whatever else.

[*The History of al-Tabari: The Conquest of Arabia*, p. 100]

Abu Bakr did not show a lot of clemency here.