Religiosity and Its Role in Academia: Hindrance or Boon?

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As a Hindrance

History as an academic pursuit demands a certain level of neutrality, especially since in its nature it is written by humans, particularly biased creatures. For this reason, it is worth discussing instances when this neutrality is compromised, such as in the case of Karen Armstrong, a historian of religion and a "liberal, mystical Christian,"[1]. Armstrong's view on religion is always positive and she tries to build a better reputation for religion and religious peoples in her work. Unfortunately, this aspect of Armstrong's work tends to take precedence over historical accuracy, thus costing her credibility, which her critics have been quick to mention. On the other hand, it is this same sympathy for religious peoples that allows her to create positive, interfaith dialogue and form multidimensional perspectives on the question of what role religion plays as the cause of violence. Because this issue offers certain nuances about what it means to be a "good" historian, in this paper I will argue that Armstrong's religiosity can serve as a hindrance to her academic credibility while also helping her formulate a richer, multi-dimensional view on complex issues.

When individuals have biases, these biases tend to shape their worldview. This also applies to Karen Armstrong, who allows her religiosity to bend her perception of historical fact. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in her 1993 novel *A History of God*, where Armstrong states that their [monotheists] alterations to their religion "did not disturb most monotheists before our own day because they were quite clear that their ideas about God were not sacrosanct [too important to be interfered with] but could only be provisional [allowed to change]."[2] In this statement, she is trying to communicate that monotheists did not see their faith as rigid, and would actually not mind any changes that would have altered their method of practice.

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[1] "Karen Armstrong," Wikipedia, last modified November 22, 2020, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karen_Armstrong.

[2] Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: the 4000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (New York, New York: Knopf, 1993), xxi.

In this statement, Armstrong had allowed herself to make a broad, ahistorical observation, of which there is much evidence to prove her wrong. When one looks at the entire history of medieval Europe, one can see that countries have gone to war, sometimes even within their own borders, in order to set their religious practices as the one, true form. A specific example which shows just how much religious peoples viewed their particular beliefs to be sacrosanct would be the Crusades (1095-1492]. During this time, Christians believed that their fellow monotheistic faith, Islam, was heathenous and had to be eradicated. Another example would be the Thirty Years War (1618-1648), in which members of the same faith, Christianity, were at war over the specifics of how to properly worship God, specifically whether through Protestantism or Catholicism.

As a religious historian, Armstrong frames her arguments in an attempt to improve the reputation of religious groups. By drawing monotheistic people as complacent and accepting of changes to their respective religions, Armstrong went to the length of declaring utterly untrue historical observations- which can be seen with the fact that the Crusades were fought because Catholics genuinely believed that the sanctity of their faith was in peril since the "holy land" [Jerusalem] was being ruled by Muslims. As a historian, she needs to be aware that there have in fact been countless wars fought over the fact that people believed that their faith was sacrosanct and not at all provisional. This instance is the first of many in which one can firmly determine that Armstrong has allowed her religiosity to get in the way of her historical accuracy.

In her 2006 novel *Muhammad: A Prophet of Our Time,* Armstrong tries making a case for why the replacement of pre-Islamic polyandry [women who have many husbands] in favor of Islamic polygyny [men who have many wives] was beneficial for the women of Arabia. Armstrong claims that polyandry in pre-Islamic society was "a form of licensed prostitution… paternity was,

therefore, uncertain."[3] As people who spend most of their lives studying historical works, historians are urged to be on the lookout for any mention of two things: prostitution and homosexuality. In the study of history, we are told to be wary of the instances when our historical sources mention 1) prostitution and 2) homosexuality, since these subjects have often been the tools used to slander certain groups. Finding either of these accusations in an author's work usually points to a clear case of bias, meaning that there is a risk of historical inaccuracy within the text.

In the West, Islamic polygyny has often been viewed as sexist against Muslim women since it makes it seem that women in that culture are disposable and can be easily replaced. Armstrong's attempt to improve the reputation of polygyny is a noble concept, since it offers a multivariate perspective on the subject of cultural norm and how we should all work towards understanding each other on a higher level. Having established this, it is unfortunate that the manner in which Armstrong has set about doing this involves slanderous behavior, showing that she has clear biases against pre-Islamic culture. By accusing an entire group of people of participating in prostitution and claiming that the children of these marriages didn't know their fathers, Armstrong is making broad assumptions and deliberately misleading the reader. What this suggests is that Armstrong is not presenting a neutral observation of history, but rather one that is extremely biased, showing how her religiosity has hindered the quality of her work.

As a religious historian who has allowed her religious views to take precedence in her work, Karen Armstrong has been the victim of much criticism from the Atheist community. These critics choose to target her over other historians because her religiosity causes her to make many errors in her work, yet she still managed to rise to fame. One such critic is biologist Jerry Coyne. In 2015, Coyne posted a blog titled "The Unctuous and Dangerous Karen Armstrong". In this post,

[3] Karen Armstrong, *Muhammad: A Prophet of Our Time (*New York, New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 134.

he stated that Armstrong's "modus operandi is to repeatedly deny that any violence in the world comes from 'true' religion."[4] This accusation holds truthful grounding. In her 2014 book *Fields of Blood*, Armstrong sets out to improve the reputation of religion by tethering its connection from the violence of the world, pointing out that "so indelible is the aggressive image of religious faith in our secular consciousness that we routinely load the violent sins of the twentieth century onto the back of 'religion'."[5]

Armstrong is right in pointing out that religion does serve as a scapegoat for most of the world's violence, even situations in which it truly is not a factor. In fact, this observation can lead to deeper reflection about the multi-faceted causes of violence in the world, such as economic, social and political forces. However, in her eagerness to prove this point, she cites the Crusades, the Inquisition, and the Wars of Religion of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as examples for when religion was not the main driving force of violence[6]. Unfortunately, even if one were to argue that the leaders behind these wars started them for political gains, it was the people, in their thousands, who fought for their genuine religious beliefs. To completely deny religion's role in these wars is an ahistorical analysis and costs her academic credibility.

One can understand Armstrong's desire to reinvent religion's reputation and reclaim it as solely a force for good. However, there is a limit to how much one can deny religion's role behind historical violence. In this case, Jerry Coyne made an important and relevant point about Armstrong's religiosity as a problem. With her level of fame and the idea that she as an academic

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[4] Coyne, Jerry. "The Unctuous and Dangerous Karen Armstrong." *Why Evolution Is True (*blog). January 23, 2015. Accessed November 30, 2020. https://whyevolutionistrue.com/2015/01/23/the-unctuous-and-dangerous-karen-armstrong/.

[5] Karen Armstrong, *Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence* (New York, New York: Knopfe, 2014), 1.

[6] Ibid, 1

can be trusted to provide dependable information, Armstrong's false claims could eventually pose as a threat to the sanctity of academic prestige.

In the 21st century, perhaps no international issue has been as stigmatized as that of Islamic extremism. For this reason, Karen Armstrong's publications on Islam have been praised for how they create positive inter-faith dialogue. Sometimes the easiest way to clear up the reputation of a religion is by tethering its connection from the violent acts committed in its name. The way that Armstrong goes about accomplishing this is by making broad, oversimplified conclusions on complex topics. A particular critic who addresses this issue in Armstrong's rhetoric is Jonathan Benthall. In his 2016 novel *Islamic Charities and Islamic Humanism in Troubled Times*, Benthall criticized the way Armstrong attributes Islamic extremism to the lack of religious education on behalf of the young perpetrators. Benthall points out that Armstrong's view "downplays the sometimes sophisticated exploitation of Scripture by jihadi idealogues, and in particular their reinterpretation of the literalist teachings of the fourteenth century scholar Ibn Taymiyyah, a forerunner of Wahhabism."[7]

In her attempt to completely dissociate Islam from Islamic extremism, Armstrong asserts the idea that a proper religious education could have prevented many a perpetrator from committing violent acts. By pointing out that jihadi idealogues (who possess a thorough religious education) are the ones who use religious text to enable their behavior, Benthall finds a flaw in Armstrong's argument. By doing so, Benthall sheds light on an uncomfortable truth: though Armstrong's religiosity helps her garner sympathy for religious peoples, it is this same characteristic that leads her to make broad, inaccurate observations about complex political issues.

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[7] Jonathan Benthall, *Islamic Charities and Islamic Humanism in Troubled Times (*Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 190.

In this case, Armstrong not only costs herself academic credibility, but contributes nothing to the ongoing conversation about one of the most pressing issues of our day.

As a Boon

For all the times that her religiosity cost her, there is an aspect of this same characteristic that enriches the quality of Armstrong's academic observation: it helps her create positive, inter-faith dialogue. As one can broadly assume, the world we currently live in is more divided than ever before. For this reason, the skill of bringing different people together is rare and priceless. Armstrong is one such individual, and her religiosity gives her sympathy for religious peoples, helping her create a dialogue which sows the seeds for a future of peace. As I explained earlier, Armstrong is often met with her fair share of backlash and is accused of allowing her religiosity to cloud her judgement. However, an analysis of some of these criticisms will in fact show that what Armstrong does is the complete opposite; she allows her religiosity to help her form multidimensional perspectives on complex issues.

In his 2011 blog post "Losing Our Spines to Save Our Necks," the neo-atheist Sam Harris pushes a sentiment all too commonly shared by the West, that of the supposedly wholly evil and dangerous Islam. Not only has he established himself as opposed to religion and all its forms, but he particularly despises Islam. In fact, he claims that "the connection between the doctrine of Islam and Islamist violence is simply not open to dispute…. to deny it is to retreat within a fantasy world of political correctness and religious apology… like the much-admired Karen Armstrong."[8] Harris' opinions reflect the fact that he has no deeper, sacred understanding of religion. In fact, he sees it as a corrupt force for evil. Because he doesn't sympathize with religious people, his

[8] Harris, Sam. "Losing Our Spines to Save Our Necks." *HuffPost* (blog). May 25, 2011. Accessed November 30, 2020. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/losing-our-spines-to-save_b_100132.

observation of political issues connected to religion can only be as deep as a simple connection between the identification of the religion of the perpetrators and the conclusion that it is solely the fault of the religion.

Armstrong's work combats the view that Islam is solely a source for evil by reminding us that the existence of Islam has spanned over a millennium and has actually served as a source of good for humanity over this period. In her 1992 article "The Andalus Legacy- A New World Discovered: An Old World Destroyed", Armstrong laments the Christian takeover of Spain after the 800-year reign of Muslims. She remarks how this marked a shift in the region from widespread tolerance of all religions to the persecution of Jews and Muslims. She claims that "The Christians of Spain… found their contact with Islam fruitful and invigorating… Muslim culture of the peninsula which was light years ahead of the rest of Europe during the early Middle Ages."[9]

In his declaration that Islamic doctrine directly leads to extremism, Harris deliberately ignores the 1,400-year long history of the religion. In doing so, he conveniently disregards all the good that it has brought to the world for most of its existence, such as advanced surgery (as well as the concept of vaccines), the world's first "university", mathematics (in the form of algebra), and astrology. For this reason, Armstrong's knowledge of history and sympathy for Muslims allows her to bring to light this often-overlooked aspect of Islam and present it as a valid point to consider when judging its merits. This instance highlights the fact that Armstrong's religiosity can serve as a boon for her. It gives her sympathy for different groups and reminds her that just as religion is held accountable for all the negativity it causes, so too should it be celebrated for the good done in its name.

[9] Karen Armstrong, "The Andalus Legacy," in *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe*, vol. 25, no. 2, 1992, 4.

When one takes a look at history and even the current state of the world, they will inevitably see a pattern of violence being committed in the name of religion. Though this may be the case, not all people who use religion as an excuse have purely "religious" intentions. Because of her deeply felt connection to the mystical elements of the world and positive understanding of faith, Armstrong is better able to detect when religion is used as a mask for other underlying motivations. Sam Harris, one of the most outspoken, anti-Islamic individuals of our day, had mockingly responded to Armstrong's sympathy for Muslims in his 2010 blog post "The God Fraud". To make the argument that Islam is purely evil, he mocks that "Hassan al-Banna and Tariq Ramadan are paragons of meliorism [the world can be made better through human effort] and wisdom" and reminds us that there is an "inexhaustible supply of martyrs in the Muslim world."[10] In this statement, Harris is making his observations based on the narrative perpetuated by Western media, which usually shows Islam in direct correlation to terrorism. Because he is using this simple, surface-level observation, he is able to point to many "martyrs" as examples to support his statement. What Harris fails to consider is the fact that these aggressors might be using Islam as a cover-up for ulterior motives, or they may be so severely misguided that they have forgotten that Islam is religion of peace, which means that their actions counteract their claims of being "Muslims".

As a response to the misconception that Islam is only capable of evil, Armstrong does a 2014 interview with Michael Schulsen to bring forth the idea that although there are instances when individuals committed heinous acts in the name of religion, not all of them are purely religiously motivated. As an example, she states that this is "very clear in bin Laden's discourse. He talks about God and Allah and Islam and all that, but he had very clear political aims and

[10] Harris, Sam. "The God Fraud." *Sam Harris* (blog). January 5, 2010. Accessed November 30, 2020. https://samharris.org/the-god-fraud/

attitudes towards Saudi Arabia, towards Western involvement in Middle Eastern affairs."[11]The importance of Armstrong pointing to Osama bin Laden as a case study is because he is the single most referenced individual when people want to show that Islam is a violent religion. By showing that even behind bin Laden's guise of being a religiously devoted man and doing what he did in the name of God, he had ulterior political motives, Armstrong shows that religion can be exploited as a tool for political gain. Because Armstrong is religious herself, she can more easily detect when one's religion is true versus when one uses it for ulterior motives, which is always the case when it comes to extremism. This insight is something that Harris does not possess, which is why this situation illustrates a case where Armstrong's religiosity has helped her detect instances where religion is used as a mask to hide political motives, thereby enriching her perspective.

The Middle East has been under political turmoil in recent decades, and because it is an area of the world often stigmatized and feared by the West, Muslims have been greatly vilified by both Western media and culture. Consequently, most non-Muslims who are Islamophobic attempt to rationalize the turbulent state of the Middle East as due to some innate fault within Islam and its practitioners. This way of thinking leads to a cycle of misunderstanding and violence on both the parts of Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Driven by her sympathy towards religious peoples, Armstrong uses her broad knowledge of political history to provide some much-needed context for why the Middle East has gotten to where it is today. In 2015, Armstrong gave an interview with Lisette Thooft where she was asked to speak on Islam. When asked what the cause of Muslim terrorism was, Armstrong attributed it to the fact that modernity came to the Middle East through colonial subjugation. In fact, secularism was introduced with much violence, and the West

[11]Armstrong, Karen. "Karen Armstrong on Sam Harris and Bill Maher: 'It fills me with despair, because this is the sort of talk that led to the concentration camps.'" Interview by Michael Schulson. *Salon*, November 23, 2014.

consistently supported rulers like Saddam Hussein who had denied his people the freedom of expression.[12]

The reason why the analysis presented forth by Armstrong is impressive is because it is an original way of thinking, far more complex than the simple attribution of the declining state of the Middle East to Muslims themselves. Further, by drawing on colonialism as one of the main causes of the political problems of the region, she makes the West reflect on the responsibility it holds for bringing the Middle East to where it is today. In this way, she brings back the human aspect of Muslims and shows that if anything, they are victims who reacted to an ongoing oppression, which then led to more violence. Because of this, the causes of the Middle East being in political decline are more likely colonization, Western militarism, enforcement of foreign ideals, and American support of corrupt leaders in the region. This instance once again demonstrates how Armstrong's religiosity serves to benefit the quality of her work, offering her the chance to view current events through the lens of colonization. In doing so, she helps remind us that we are all just people at the end of the day, and that there should be more compassion on the part of the West towards Muslims.

A discussion of Armstrong's religiosity brings about certain nuances concerning what it means to be a "good" historian. As we have seen, there are many cases in which her drive to sympathize with religion and its practitioners has caused her to lose credibility. In her desire to improve the reputation of religious people, she makes ahistorical observations, uses slander, and falsely claims that a religious education would prevent violence. On the other hand, it is this same characteristic that helps her be open-minded when defending religious groups, such as Muslims. To the many remarks that Islam is evil, Armstrong responds by reminding us the historical good it has brought the world, how there are always political motives behind religiously motivated

[12] Armstrong, Karen. "Karen Armstrong: 'There is nothing in the Islam that is more violent than Christianity.'" Interviewed by Lisette Thooft. *Nieuwwij*, January 18, 2015.

violence, and how the Middle East is in political turmoil largely due to Western colonization. Armstrong shows us how religiosity can help one see complex issues from multiple perspectives and possibly even create room for positive inter-faith dialogue between different groups. All in all, an analysis of Armstrong's work reveals that for historians, religiosity can both serve as a hindrance to one's work and be a boon at the same time; perhaps the question should not be whether it makes you a good historian, but how it enhances the quality of your perspective of the world and how the incorporation of this perspective can benefit society as a whole.

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