

The Role of Religion in Today's Conflict.¹

By Ms. Karen Armstrong

As we are all agreed, the conflict between the Muslim world and the West is essentially political but on a popular level religion is seen as one of its root causes. Islam is regarded in the West as an essentially violent faith that impels worshippers to acts of terror and on the Muslim side claim to be inspired wholly by the Qur'an and the Shari'ah. Secularists sometimes regard all religion as essentially divisive and obscurantist. *There is a symbiotic relationship between religion and contemporary politics: each influences and exacerbates each other.* It is, therefore, essential that our report looks at this dimension of the current impasse, dispels misapprehensions, gives an accurate appraisal of the precise role of religion in the current crisis, and makes some practical recommendations for the future.

- First, it is important to make it clear that none of the so-called “world religions” condones or encourages killing. My recent studies show that at their inception, they were all rooted in a disciplined rejection of violence. All promote the ideals of compassion, justice and respect for the sacred rights of the individual. This is no less true of Islam than of Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, Confucianism or Daoism.
- It is true, however, that all these faiths first developed in periods of great violence and that their scriptures often bear the marks of the warfare and aggression of their time. We see this clearly in the Jewish Scriptures, the New Testament and the Qur'an, which all contain passages that can and have been used by extremists to justify violence and intolerance.
- Historically it can be observed that when warfare becomes endemic in a region, religion gets, as it were, sucked into the conflict and becomes part of the problem. This was certainly the case in eleventh century Europe at the time of the First Crusade, and it has happened in the Middle East or Afghanistan in our own time. When warfare becomes chronic and violence an everyday occurrence, this affects people's dreams, fantasies, ambitions, relationships, and can also affect their religion ~ especially if people lose hope in the ordinary political process and think that they have nothing to lose.
- Modernity has privileged some at the expense of others; from the very beginning, people were victimized by the modernization of their region: the African slaves, the Native Americans, the Jews of Europe and the colonized peoples have all been casualties of modernity. Some of the traditionally devout have also felt violated by a secularism that seems inimical and even lethal their faith.
- The transition from a pre-modern to a modernized society and economy is painful. In Europe the process, which lasted from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, was punctuated by bloody revolutions succeeded by reigns of terror, dictatorships, wars of religion, and alienation in the newly industrialized cities. In the United States, Protestants created the first

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fundamentalist movement at the time of World War I in order to protect Christianity, which, they felt, was imperilled by the new ideas and institutions. In some of the colonized countries, however, the process has been even more traumatic because it has been far too rapid. Secularization has often been experienced as an assault. It has also created a division between a Western-educated elite and the majority who feel bewildered by the new secular institutions. Thus religion has become embattled and even militant.

- In the middle of the twentieth century, it was widely assumed that secularism was the coming ideology and that religion would never again play a major role in world events. But in almost every single one of the major world religions ~ in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism and Confucianism, ~ an aggressive piety, that is deeply political, has challenged this assumption, determined to drag God/religion from the sidelines to which they have been relegated in modern secular society and back to centre stage.² In almost every region where a secularized society, separating religion and politics, has been established a religious counter-cultural movement has sprung up alongside it in conscious rejection, displaying a widespread disappointment with modernity. Whatever the pundits, politicians and intellectuals claim, people all over the world have demonstrated that they want to see religion represented more fully in public life.
- These “fundamentalist” movements are by no means always violent, however. Most “fundamentalists” simply try to live what they consider a good religious life in a world that seems increasingly hostile to faith and their counteroffensive against the mainstream is peaceable. Only a tiny proportion of “fundamentalists” worldwide take part in acts of terror.
- There is a potential for violence, however. Every single one of the “fundamentalisms” that I have studied in Judaism, Christianity and Islam is rooted in a profound fear of annihilation, convinced that modern society wants to wipe out true faith. This visceral dread of extermination can be clearly seen in the ideologies and mythologies created by these groups, which are often aggressively nihilistic and apocalyptic (See the “Rapture” mythology of the Christian Right in the United States; the messianic eschatology of the religious Zionists in Israel; the primitive eschatology of some Islamists). “Fundamentalists” believe that they are fighting for survival and when people feel that their backs are to the wall in this way, they can lash out violently.
- It is a mistake to view a “fundamentalism” as typical of the tradition; “fundamentalisms” are innovative movements; even though they claim to represent the faith, they are in fact unorthodox ~ even anti-orthodox. They are promoting new doctrines: the Protestant Fundamentalists’ emphasis on the literal infallibility of scripture is a wholly new development; they are reading

² We should note that, though it is hard to find a substitute, the term “fundamentalism is unsatisfactory;” it was coined by Protestant reformers in the United States, who wanted to return to what they regarded as the “fundamentals” of Christianity. But the term does not apply satisfactorily to other rejectionist movements

their scriptures in an entirely modern way, as is the centrality given to *jihad*, meaning “holy war”, by some Islamists.

- The fear and defensiveness of these groups means that they often distort the very faith that they are trying to preserve, emphasizing the belligerent aspects of the tradition and downplaying those that speak of compassion and benevolence. But at the same time, this militant piety has put religion back on the map. It has become a powerful vehicle for dissent and these ideologies should not be dismissed as risible. Many of these groups have considerable political influence. The Christian Right, for example, has a strong influence on the current administration.
- In some regions ~ the United States, Israel and parts of the Muslim world ~ society has become dangerously polarized. There is a gulf between those who appreciate modernization and those who express their alienation from secularized society in a religious counter-narrative. They find it increasingly difficult to understand each other.
- “Fundamentalism” sometimes takes the form of “religious patriotism,” replacing the 19th century European model of nationalism with one based on religion. This is very clear among the Religious Right in the United States and among the Religious Zionists in Israel. In the Muslim world, where Western secular nationalism was a foreign import, this religious national identity is regarded as a restoration of integrity, a return to the state of affairs that existed before the colonial disruption.
- By the end of the twentieth century, it was clear that in all three of the monotheistic faiths, the fear of some of these “fundamentalist” groups was hardening into righteous rage.
- The history of Jewish, Christian and Muslim “fundamentalism” shows that it usually begins with what is perceived to be an assault by the secularizing or liberalizing sectors of society. There is a strong sense of humiliation. Certain issues become symbols of everything that is wrong with the modern world. Examples are the issues of abortion, evolution and homosexuality in Christian fundamentalism; the secular state of Israel and the dispossession of the Palestinians have become symbolic issues in many forms of Jewish and Muslim “fundamentalism.” This makes rational discussion of these topics well-nigh impossible.
- “Fundamentalism” always starts as an intra-religious struggle: “fundamentalists” begin by attacking their own fellow countrymen or co-religionists and only at a later stage, if at all, do they turn against a foreign foe.
- Of great importance is the fact whenever these movements have been attacked they have become more extreme. The assault confirms the “fundamentalists’” fear that they really are in jeopardy from the secularist/ liberal establishment. There are many examples: the media attack on the Christian fundamentalists after the Scopes Trial (1925) drove them from the left to the far right of the political spectrum; President Jamal Abdul Nasser’s persecution, incarceration

and torture of the Muslim Brotherhood led to the development of Sunni Fundamentalism; today the images from Iraq, Abu Graeb and Guantanamo Bay have increased the membership of Al-Qaeda.

- Attempting to exploit militant groups to get them “on side” is also counter-productive. President Anwar Sadat initially courted the Islamist student groups that helped to kill him; Israel initially supported and funded Hamas to undermine the PLO.
- From the very beginning ~ perhaps even from the Neanderthal period ~ human beings have been myth-makers. We are meaning-seeking creatures and perpetually create mythologies to explain our circumstances, especially when we are in distress. There is a great deal of mythology today; a diluted form of the extreme myths of the “fundamentalist” groups mentioned above has become widespread among the general public and even among politicians. The “clash of civilizations” theory is another such myth. *Note:* traditionally, a myth was never expected to conform directly to objective reality; it has usually expressed a state of mind rather than external fact. The “clash” theory has deep roots in Western society and can be dated back to the Crusades. Consequently it is particularly difficult to combat.

Practical Recommendations

1. The great world traditions are at one in maintaining the primacy of compassion and justice, the principal of concern for everybody (including those who do not share their beliefs), and a commitment to peace. All too often secondary concerns (such as doctrinal orthodoxy or institutional integrity) take pride of place. Religious leaders and laity alike should reach across sectarian divides to recover a strong appreciation of this common core. If religious people cannot help to heal the terrible divisions of our time, they will fail the great test of the twenty-first century.
2. All religious leaders concerned about the increasingly militant profile of their faith, even those who occupy a relatively humble position, should take the initiative in reclaiming the compassionate core of their *own* tradition. They should study the texts in their *own* scriptures that have incited their co-religionists to aggression and hatred, examining the context in which these texts were created and seeing how they relate to the tradition as a whole; and engage in a creative critique of text books and preaching methods. Before castigating other traditions, they should study the history of their *own* failings. Such self-criticism is regarded as imperative and central in all the major world religions. They should also make the faithful aware of the profound unanimity of the world religions. This should take priority.
3. In the same spirit, religious groups should discourage double standards, the demonization of the “other”, and polarizing,

dehumanizing mythologies, which are against the explicit teachings of all the great traditions.

4. There should be serious discussion, in all religious traditions and at all levels of society, about the nature of religious texts and the way we read our scriptures. The rational bias of our scientific modernity has resulted in a new and unskilful literalism. In the pre-modern world, for example, Jews, Christians and Muslims all relished highly allegorical interpretations of scripture: as the word of God, it was infinite and could not be confined to one interpretation.
5. There should be a serious study of the ideology and mythology of “fundamentalist” or extremist religious groups. They should not be simply dismissed as the lunatic fringe, ignored, or regarded with secularist disdain, because these teachings often express fears and anxieties that no society can safely ignore.
6. Secular conflicts should not be allowed to fester. If they do, the issues can become sacralized and this makes final reconciliation far more difficult.
7. During the second half of the twentieth century, there was a religious revival in many parts of the world. This is not a passing phase, but is here to stay. “Fundamentalism” is one example of this new religiosity, and it has always developed in a symbiotic relationship with a secularism/liberalism that is experienced as alien, invasive, aggressive or even lethal. Unjust, cruel, or divisive policies are the breeding ground for religious extremism.
8. Attacking religious extremist groups is counter-productive; history ~ especially recent history ~ shows that this will make them more extreme.
9. It would be advisable for the media and politicians to refrain from such phrases as “Muslim terrorism.” These atrocities violate the traditions of Islam; we never called the IRA “Catholic terrorists.” Linking “Islam” with “terrorism” associates the two indelibly in the minds of the population in a way that is a continual slur on Islam and therefore harmful to the cause of peace and reconciliation. The phrase “moderate Muslims” should also be avoided, for the same reason. During the 1970s, British and Irish Catholics were never asked if they were “moderates.”

ATTACHMENT ONE:

GUARDIAN 22

“Islamic” Terrorism?

Last year I attended a conference in the United States about security and intelligence in the so-called “war against terror” and was astonished to hear one of the more belligerent participants, who had, as far as I could tell, nothing but contempt for religion, strongly argue that, as a purely practical expedient, politicians and the media must stop referring to “Muslim terrorism.” It was obvious, he said, that the atrocities had nothing to do with Islam, and to suggest otherwise was not merely inaccurate but dangerously counterproductive.

Rhetoric is a powerful weapon in any conflict. We cannot hope to convert Osama bin Laden from his vicious ideology; our priority must be to stem the flow of disaffected young people into organizations such as al-Qaeda, instead of alienating them by routinely coupling their religion with immoral violence. Incorrect and imprecise statements about “Islam” have convinced too many people in the Muslim world that the West is an implacable enemy of their faith. Yet, as we found at the conference, it is not easy to find an alternative way of referring to this terrorism; the attempt, however, can be a salutary exercise that reveals the complexity of what we are up against.

We need a phrase that is more exact than “Islamic terror.” These acts may be committed by people who call themselves Muslims, but they violate essential principles of Islam. The Qur’an prohibits aggressive warfare, permits only war in self-defence, and insists that peace, reconciliation and forgiveness are the true Islamic values. It also states firmly that there must be no coercion in religious matters, and for centuries Islam had a much better record of religious tolerance than Christianity.

Like the Bible, the Qur’an has its share of aggressive texts, but like all the great religions, its main thrust is towards kindness and compassion. Islamic law outlaws war against any country in which Muslims are allowed to practise their religion freely, and forbids the use of fire, the destruction of buildings and the killing of innocent civilians during a military campaign. So even though Muslims ~ like Jews or Christians ~ have all too often failed to live up to their high ideals, it is not because of the religion *per se*.

We rarely, if ever, called the IRA bombings “Catholic” terrorism because we knew enough about the strengths and weaknesses of the Church to realize that this was not essentially a religious campaign. Indeed, like the Irish Republican movement, many fundamentalist movements worldwide are simply new forms of nationalism in a highly unorthodox religious guise. This is obviously the case with Zionist fundamentalism in Israel and with the fervently patriotic Christian Right in the United States. In the Muslim world too, where the old European nationalist ideology has always seemed an alien import, fundamentalisms are often more about a search for social identity and national self-definition than religion. They represent a widespread desire to return to the roots of the culture, before it was invaded and weakened by the colonial powers.

Because it is increasingly recognized that the terrorists in no way represent mainstream Islam, some people prefer to call them “Jihadists” but this is not very satisfactory either. Extremists and unscrupulous politicians have purloined the word *jihad* for their own purposes, but its real meaning is not “holy war” but “struggle” or “effort.” Muslims are commanded to make a massive attempt on all fronts ~ social, economic, intellectual, ethical and spiritual ~ to put the will of God into practice. Sometimes a military struggle may be a regrettable necessity in order to defend decent values, but an oft-quoted tradition has the Prophet Muhammad say after a military victory: “We are coming back from the Lesser Jihad [i.e. the battle] and returning to the Greater Jihad,” the far more important, difficult and momentous struggle to reform our own society and our own hearts.

Jihad is thus a cherished spiritual value that, for the majority of Muslims, has no connection at all with violence. Last year at the University of Kentucky, I met a delightful young man called Jihad, whose parents had not given him that name in the hope that he would become a holy warrior but because they wanted him to be a truly spiritual man who would make the world a better place. The term Jihadi terrorism is likely to be offensive, therefore, and will win no hearts or minds.

At our conference in Washington, many people favoured the term “Wahhabi terrorism.” They pointed out that most of the hijackers on September 11 came from Saudi Arabia, where a peculiarly intolerant form of Islam, known as Wahhabism, was the state religion. They also argued that this description would be popular with those many Muslims who tended to be hostile to the Saudis. I was not happy with this, however, because even though the narrow, sometimes bigoted vision of Wahhabism makes it a fruitful ground for extremism, the vast majority of Wahhabis do not commit acts of terror.

Osama bin Laden was not inspired by Wahhabism but by the writings of the Egyptian ideologue Sayyid Qutb, who was executed by President Jamal Abdul Nasser in 1966. Almost every fundamentalist movement in Sunni Islam has been strongly influenced by Qutb, so there is a good case for calling the violence that some of his followers commit “Qutbian terrorism.” Qutb urged his followers to withdraw from the moral and spiritual barbarism of modern society and fight it to the death.

Western people should learn more about such thinkers as Qutb, and become aware of the many dramatically different shades of opinion in the Muslim world. There are too many lazy, unexamined assumptions about Islam, which tends to be regarded as an amorphous, monolithic entity. Remarks such as “They hate our freedom” may give some a righteous glow, but they are not useful because they are rarely accompanied by a rigorous analysis of who exactly “they” are.

The story of Qutb is also instructive as a reminder that militant religiosity is often the product of social, economic and political factors. Qutb was imprisoned for fifteen years in one of Nasser’s vile concentration camps, where he and thousands of other members of the Muslim Brotherhood were subjected to physical and mental torture. He entered the camp as a moderate, but the prison made him a fundamentalist. Modern secularism, as he had experienced it under Nasser, seemed a great evil and a lethal assault on faith.

Precise intelligence is essential in any conflict. It is important to know who our enemies are, but equally crucial to know who they are not. It is even more vital to avoid turning potential friends into foes. By making the disciplined effort to name our enemies correctly, we will learn more about them, and come one step nearer, perhaps, to solving the seemingly intractable and increasingly perilous problems of our divided world.

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ATTACHMENT TWO

GUARDIAN 24

What is Scripture?

Human beings, in nearly all cultures, have long engaged in a rather strange activity. They have taken a literary text, given it special status and attempted to live according to its precepts. These texts are usually of considerable antiquity yet they are expected to throw light on situations that their authors could not have imagined. In times of crisis, people turn to their scriptures with renewed zest, and, with much creative ingenuity, compel them to speak to their current predicament. We are seeing a great deal of scriptural activity at the moment.

This is ironic, because the concept of scripture has become problematic in the modern period. The Scopes Trial of 1925, when Christian fundamentalists in the United States tried to ban the teaching of evolution in the public schools, and the more recent affair of the Satanic Verses both reveal deep-rooted anxiety about the nature of revelation and the integrity of sacred texts. People talk confidently about scripture, but it is not clear that even the most ardent religious practitioners really know what it is.

Protestant fundamentalists, for example, claim that they read the Bible in the same way as the early Christians, but their belief that it is literally true in every detail is a recent innovation, formulated for the first time in the late 19th century. Before the modern period, Jews, Christians and Muslims all relished highly allegorical interpretations of scripture. The word of God was infinite and could not be tied down to a single interpretation. Preoccupation with literal truth is a product of the scientific revolution, when reason achieved such spectacular results that mythology was no longer regarded as a valid path to knowledge.

We tend now to read our scriptures for accurate information, so that the Bible, for example, becomes a holy encyclopaedia, in which the faithful look up facts about God. Many assume that if the scriptures are not historically and scientifically correct, they cannot be true at all. But this was not how scripture was originally conceived. All the verses of the Qur'an, for example, are called "parables" (*ayat*); its images of paradise, hell and the last judgment are also *ayat*, pointers to transcendent realities that we can only glimpse through signs and symbols.

We distort our scriptures if we read them in an exclusively literal sense. There has recently been much discussion about the way Muslim terrorists interpret the Qur'an. Does the Qur'an really instruct Muslims to slay unbelievers wherever they find them? Does it promise the suicide bomber instant paradise and seventy virgins? If so, Islam is clearly chronically prone to terrorism. These debates have often been confused by an inadequate understanding of the way scripture works.

People do not robotically obey every single edict of their sacred texts. If they did, the world would be full of Christians who love their enemies and turn the other cheek when attacked. There are political reasons why a tiny minority of Muslims are turning to terrorism, which have nothing to do with Islam. But because of the way people read their scriptures these days, once a terrorist has decided to blow up a London bus, he can probably find scriptural texts that seem to endorse his action.

Part of the problem is that we are now reading our scriptures instead of listening to them. When, for example, Christian fundamentalists argue about the Bible, they hurl texts back and forth competitively, citing chapter and verse in a kind of spiritual tennis match. But this detailed familiarity with the Bible was impossible before the modern invention of printing made it feasible for everybody to own a copy and before widespread literacy ~ an essentially modern phenomenon ~ enabled them to read it for themselves.

Hitherto the scriptures had always been transmitted orally, in a ritual context that, like a great theatrical production, put them in a special frame of mind. Christians heard extracts of the Bible chanted during the Mass; they could not pick and choose their favourite texts. In India, young men studied the Veda for years with their guru, adopting a self-effacing and non-violent lifestyle that was meant to influence their understanding of the texts. In Judaism, the process of studying Torah and Talmud with a rabbi was itself a transformative experience that was just as important as the content.

The last thing anybody should attempt is to read the Qur'an straight through from cover to cover because it was designed to be recited aloud. Indeed, the word *qur'an* means "recitation". Much of the meaning is derived from sound patterns that link one passage with another, so that Muslims who hear extracts chanted aloud thousands of times in the course of a lifetime acquire a tacit understanding that one teaching is always qualified and supplemented by other texts, and cannot be seen in isolation. The words that they hear again and again are not "holy war," but "kindness," "courtesy," "peace," "justice" and "compassion."

Historians have noted that the shift from oral to written scripture often results in strident, misplaced certainty. Reading gives people the impression that they have an immediate grasp of their scripture; they are not compelled by a teacher to appreciate its complexity. Without the aesthetic and ethical disciplines of ritual, they can approach a text in a purely cerebral fashion, missing the emotive and therapeutic aspects of its stories and instructions.

Solitary reading also enables people to read their scriptures too selectively, focusing on isolated texts that they read out of context, and ignoring others that do not chime with their own predilections. Religious militants, who read their scriptures in this way, often distort the tradition they are trying to defend. Christian fundamentalists concentrate on the aggressive Book of Revelation and pay no attention to the Sermon on the Mount, while Muslim extremists rely on the more belligerent passages of the Qur'an and overlook its oft-repeated instructions to leave vengeance to God and make peace with the enemy.

We cannot turn the clock back. Most of us are accustomed to acquiring information instantly at the click of a mouse, and have neither the talent nor the patience for the disciplines that characterized pre-modern interpretation. But we can counter the dangerous tendency to selective reading of sacred texts. The Qur'an insists that its teaching must be understood "in full" (20:114), an important principle that religious teachers must impart to the disaffected young.

Muslim extremists have given the *jihad* (which they interpret reductively as “holy war”) a centrality that it never had before and have thus redefined the meaning of Islam for many non-Muslims. But in this they are often unwittingly aided by the media, who also concentrate obsessively on the more aggressive verses of the Qur’an, without fully appreciating how these are qualified by the text as a whole. We must all ~ religious and sceptics alike ~ become aware that there is more to scripture than meets the cursory eye.

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