



Interview with Karen Armstrong

Religion and violence

Renaud Fabbrì: On the one hand, the stated goal of the great world religions is to establish peace within the world, between God and human beings and within each person. On the other hand, today, religion and sectarian identities fuel many conflicts throughout the world (prompting an author like Richard Dawkins to stigmatize religion as the most important source of violence in our world). As a religious scholar, how do you account for this paradox?

Karen Armstrong: The problem is that in the modern world we have

developed a new idea of “religion”, one that was entirely alien to all pre-modern cultures. In the West, during the Enlightenment, as part of Western modernization, philosophers, such as John Locke and statesman, such as Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, defined “religion” as an essentially private quest that should be kept separate from all other “secular” undertakings. Because of Westernization and colonialism this view has percolated throughout the world. But no other culture has anything like this. In the premodern world, religion was not a separate enterprise but permeated all activities, including government and

warfare (which has always been an essential part of statecraft]. This is not because people were too stupid to distinguish two entirely distinct things, but because human beings have an inbuilt need to imbue their lives with ultimate meaning, without which we fall very easily into despair. Furthermore, human suffering is a matter of sacred import: the Prophets of Israel had harsh words for those who performed the temple rituals but neglected the plight of the poor and oppressed. And the *Quran* is a cry for justice and for the creation of a society in which wealth was shared fairly and the weak and vulnerable treated with dignity and respect. These are political matters. But warfare has always been part of human society. Consequently, “religion”, which pervaded all human activities, has acquired a violent edge. So what we call “religion” is neither all about peace nor all about war.

RF: Many authors from Plato to Eric Voegelin have stressed the connection between political disorder and the disorder within the human soul. For you, what madness has taken hold of the modern soul so that we are faced with an explosion of religious conflicts? What is mostly responsible for this state of affairs? The religions themselves, the modern or post-modern context, new types of religious belief and practices? Do you think that the insights from the spiritual and even mystical traditions can cure the modern soul?

KA: The modern soul is certainly disordered! But this disorder has also taken a purely secular turn. One could see the French Revolution, with its cry for liberty, equality and fraternity, as the beginning of the modern period; it ushered in the first liberal state, which separated religion and politics, in Europe. But during the Reign of Terror, the revolutionaries publicly beheaded 17,000 men, women and children. The French Revolution was one of the first nation-states; but in the late 19th century, the British historian Lord Acton, predicted that the nationalist emphasis on ethnicity, culture and language would make those who did not fit the national profile extremely vulnerable: in some circumstances, he said with chilling accuracy, they could even be enslaved or exterminated — and indeed during the First World War the atheistic Young Turks exterminated a million Armenians in order to create a purely Turkic state. The inability to tolerate ethnic minorities has been the great flaw of secular nationalism, leading to such crimes as the Nazi Holocaust. The two World Wars were not fought for religion but for secular nationalism. In the early twentieth century, there was an explosion of political and Marxist-inspired terrorism. During the 1950s, millions were slaughtered in the Soviet Gulag. So our modernity has been extremely violent — largely because our technology enables us to kill on

an unprecedented scale. Human beings are violent creatures. Now we are simply witnessing another outbreak of violence and terrorism — this time, religiously articulated.

RF: When faced with acts of violence perpetrated in the name of a religion, the understandable reaction of many believers is simply to claim that violence has nothing to do with their faith or more problematically to put the blame on external factors, the wrong-doings of others etc.... In your opinion, what may prompt believers to adopt a more critical and reflexive attitude toward their own faith and the history of their religion?

KA: We must all, religious or secularist, adopt a self-critical attitude. The religious have a particular responsibility to bring to the fore those tendencies that lie at the heart of all religious traditions that speak of the imperative of compassion and respect for all others. Each has developed its own version of the Golden Rule: Never treat others as you would not wish to be treated yourself and insisted that this is the essence of faith. This is the standard by which religious people should measure themselves day by day. The Golden Rule is no longer a nice ethic but an urgent global imperative. Unless we ensure that all peoples are treated as we would wish to be treated ourselves the world will simply not be a viable place.

RF: With globalization, religious principles are being increasingly challenged both by the rise of a post-modern relativism and by extremist movements that threaten to destroy religion from within. What role traditional spirituality and ethics can play in addressing the currents attempts to derail world religions and to turn them into totalitarian and nihilistic ideologies? What concrete strategies can be devised in this respect? Or is it too late?

KA: This I have dealt with in the preceding answer. But the point is that every single religious human being has to activate their tradition in a positive way. It is no use waiting for religious leaders to take the initiative. We all have to do what we can, in whatever sphere of life we find ourselves, to think creatively, and practically, — not simply leaving this to other people. All too often, religious people are simply concerned with their own spirituality. They want — in Christian terms — “to be saved.” They meditate and take part in yogic meditation in order to feel peaceful and tranquil. They want to look after their own families or their own countries and do not care about the rest of the world. But all the religious traditions insist that you cannot simply indulge a private spirituality; the religious imperative impels us all to heal the suffering we see all around us — actively and realistically. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)



did not spend time communing with God on Mount Hira; his revelations impelled him to begin an active struggle to heal the problems of this time. Jesus wrestled with Satan in the Wilderness but then embarked on a healing mission to create a new world in which rich and poor would

sit at the same table. After achieving enlightenment, the Buddha spent the rest of his life travelling through the cities of India to help human beings live creatively with their suffering. The religious enterprise must be active.



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Post-secularism and the legacy of the Axial Age

RF: The German philosopher Jürgen Habermas recently made the hypothesis of a post-secular turn in contemporary thinking, even envisioning the emergence of “post-secular world society” in which religious and secular actors would become equal partners, addressing together contemporary ethical challenges at the global level. How do you posit yourself and your work vis-à-vis this maybe irenic hypothesis formulated by Habermas?

KA: As I have said above, secularism, a grand new experiment during the 18th century, has had its great failures. But all human ideologies have their moments of decline. Religion is certainly making a

come-back. Northern Europe is now looking increasingly old-fashioned in its defiant secularism; in most other regions people are turning to religion again — and not always in a violent way. Both secularism and “religion” have great ideals as well as great failures. We all have to pool our insights. We can no longer split ourselves into these divisive camps. We are living in a globalized world in which our economies are profoundly interdependent, our histories are intertwined, and we all face the same looming environmental danger. It is now time to work together to save our world. My work has been to try to help secularists understand the religious imperative and religious people to understand that all traditions have their profound insights, all have a distinctive genius — and all have their particular vulnerabilities.

RF: Building upon the work of Karl Jaspers and others, you wrote a book about what you called the “Great Transformation” of the Axial Age. Why is it so important for us in the present historical moment to turn to the Axial Age and its heritage? What can we still learn from the sages and prophets of this period?

KA: The Axial Age peaked in the sixth century BCE. Two things were illuminating about the Axial Age — when all the great world traditions as we know them came into being — Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism,

Daoism, Greek philosophical rationalism, and monotheism. The first of these was innovation: the great sages and philosophers were not afraid to bring something entirely new to the traditions they had inherited, to innovate and attempt something drastically novel. All too often religious people seem to imagine that they have to cling to the past, instead of using the great insights of their tradition to speak to the circumstances of the present. This is desperately needed today. Every religious tradition is a dialogue between an unchanging Eternal Absolute and changing conditions on the ground; once a faith tradition is unable to speak to its troubled present, it will die — as paganism eventually died. The second insight was the ethos of compassion. Every single one of the Axial Sages developed the Golden Rule (See above) and insisted that you could not confine your compassion to your own group. You had to have what one Chinese sage called *jian ai*: “concern for everybody.” You could not confine your benevolence for your own group or for people you liked. These sages were not living in peaceful, idyllic circumstances — but were living in societies like our own, where violence had reached an unprecedented crescendo. They said that unless human beings treated other people as they would wish to be treated themselves, they would

destroy one another. That has never been truer than it is today.

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RF: Do you think that the problematic of the Axial Age has some relevance for a Muslim audience, since the emergence of Islam postdates the end of the Axial Age by several centuries?

KA: Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity were both latter-day developments of the original Axial spirit developed by the Prophets of Israel. The *Quran* too reiterates the essential aspects of the Axial movement, especially in its concern for compassion. Indeed, the *Quran* insists that it is not teaching anything new but that it is simply a “reminder” to forgetful human beings who can easily overlook these essential principles.

RF: You sometimes suggested that we may be entering a “new Axial Age.” The Axial Age was marked by the emergence of new faiths and the renewal of older ones, new insights about the self, the world and the divine Reality. Short of a new revelation, how this “new Axial Age” could transform the shape of our world

and the meaning of our lives?

KA: We don't need a new "revelation". By a new Axial Age, I referred to the scientific and technological revolution that has utterly transformed our world. But this does not mean that we can forget those crucial Axial principles (outlined above). We need them more than ever — to counter some of the dangers of the new technology, not least the dangers to the environment and the dangers of scientifically produced weaponry.



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