

# Karen Armstrong

The author, renowned for her books on comparative religion, talks to Burhan Wazir about Islam and the need for eloquent gestures



**A large part of your career has been devoted to rejecting a narrow western narrative on Islam. Why?**

I first started to take an interest around the time of the fatwa against Salman Rushdie. I abhorred Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa, and was convinced Rushdie had the right to publish whatever he chose. What also troubled me was the ease with which Rushdie's liberal supporters went from defending him to denouncing Islam as a bloodthirsty religion. This filled me with a kind of dread.

**Your latest book argues that faith alone isn't responsible for conflict. Do you think that warfare is essentially economics?**

I think we have to understand better the concept of religion in our interconnected world. When the French revolutionaries created the first secular state in Europe, they immediately invented a new religion – the religion of the nation. There are always multiple reasons why we go to war and economics plays a large role. Change is another. Experts say that whatever the ideology, terrorism is always political. It is about ousting people from power and changing the status quo. We never do anything just for God.

**At a recent lecture, you said ISIS was intent on destroying the nation states the West had set up to protect themselves. Can you expand on that?**

This goes back to globalization. There is a widespread sense that the nation state is not helping us in the way we need it to. The rhetoric of the British election right now is all about Britain. We have to start thinking more globally in our politics. The nation states created by Britain in the 1920s were set up in a very controlling way. We divided communities and lumped all kinds of incompatible people together. They were created largely to further our industrialization. ISIS is a reaction against this – an attempt to take back borders.

**You live in the UK – do you think British politicians are failing British Muslims?**

I think immigration is playing a much bigger role in defining British politics. We have a fear of the other which is very characteristic of our time. People feel they have been let down by the political and economic systems we have in place.

We are retreating into nationalistic ghettos. In Britain, there seems to be a widespread desire to get out of the European Union, which would be disastrous. It seems to me that when you close out the rest of the world, the world will come to you.

**What do you think the Middle East will look like in 100 years time?**

It all looks pretty hopeless at the moment. There were far too many unrealistic expectations with the Arab Spring. The French revolution took 90 years from its beginnings to create a secular republic. A revolution demands not just getting rid of a monarch or a dictator but turning the world upside down. I think the issue of Palestine is going to be an ongoing problem. This has acquired an immense symbolic factor which needs a solution. There is also the question of the oil, and how long it will last.

**You have argued that people of faith should remember that what binds them is compassion. How important do you think that is?**

The idea of compassion has acquired a hippy, Kumbaya meaning. In fact it means to put yourself in somebody else's shoes. It is summarised in the Golden Rule – 'One should treat others as one would like to be treated by others' – which was first enunciated by Confucius and has since been adopted by every religious institution. We have to understand because we failed to do this in the West, and we have created some of the hideous problems we face today. We must ensure that we share the planet, not with inferiors, but with equals.

**What role can Muslim, Christian and Jewish leaders play in all this?**

They should be trying to highlight the message in mosques and churches. I never thought I would hear myself saying these words but I really like what Pope Francis is doing at the moment. He has become the master of the eloquent gesture. Images speak more powerfully than any encyclical. We need more imaginative religious leaders who are prepared to understand they need compassion for everyone in the world. They are all children of God.

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*Karen Armstrong, 'Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence'*