

Book Review

## Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet

*By Karen Armstrong. San Francisco: Harper, 1992, 290 pp.*

During the almost one thousand years of European obsession with Islam, only a few authors have tried to rise above their contemporaries by presenting a more balanced view of this religious ideology. Armstrong's main aim is to encourage "this more tolerant, compassionate, and courageous tradition" (p. 15). From the very beginning, it is apparent that this book is written with an unsurpassed empathy and that it contains a degree of dismay and resentment that the truth about the Prophet and Islam has been compromised and hidden by ethnocentric European writers inspired either by the Christian church and its missionaries or modern secularism.

The main strength of the book lies in the fact that the author is not a run-of-the-mill orientalist. With experience as a free-lance writer, commentator, and television documentary producer, Armstrong does not avoid the themes so dear to European critics of the Prophet, but deals with them directly. For instance, rather than rationalizing the Prophet's polygamy,

she seems to admire it, especially his relations with 'Ā'ishah. She finds the Prophet similar to other biblical prophets: a loving, caring, and compassionate husband who groped for the love of his wives and who actively sought their advice even in the historical events taking place with breathtaking speed under the impact of his divine mission. Just because Christians "do not expect their spiritual heroes to achieve a dazzling success in mundane terms," she states, they cannot justifiably "find it scandalous and even wicked that Muhammad had to fight his way to peace, power, and victory" (p. 164). And, "today, most Christians would agree . . . that against a Hitler or a Ceausescu, fighting and armed combat is the only effective way" (p. 172). She also finds it rather arrogant of Europeans to dismiss the Qur'an as too laborious, rather than inspiring, when read in translation. Would most Christians reject the Old Testament? After all, as the author notes, when read in most translations, "the Pentateuch is an extremely dull collection of obscure laws" (p. 50).

It is interesting to note how Armstrong became interested in the Prophet. Born and raised as a Catholic, she now regards herself as belonging to no organized religion, despite the persistence of her interest in transcendental aspects of religious experience. It was mainly in search of this mysticism that she first encountered Islam in Samarkand, a once-thriving outpost of Islamic learning and culture now reduced to a few obscure archaeological sites by centuries of oppressive Czarist and then Soviet rule. In these relics, she saw an architecture reflecting a spirituality "that resonated with my own catholic past" (p. 13). Later, while working on a television documentary on Sufism, she was struck by "the Sufi appreciation of other religions—a quality that I had certainly not encountered in Christianity" (p. 14) and intrigued by the peculiarly Islamic this-worldly concern of Sufism that represents a "rebellion of the conscience against social injustices not only those of others but primarily and particularly against one's own faults" (p. 261).

This awareness challenged her views and engendered a desire to know more. While doing research on the Crusades, she read about the life of the Prophet and a translation of the Qur'an. She became convinced that the Prophet had had a transcendental encounter with God and "made a distinctive and valuable contribution to the spiritual experience of humanity" (p. 14). No wonder, then, that she shows a rather unusual interest in the Prophet's *isrā'* and *mi'rāj*, finding these events to be the termination point of his mission in Makkah and the starting point of his mission in Madīnah.

It is an experience common to all the major mystical traditions, an expression of the belief that no man can see God and live . . .

Muhammad was not going to die, but he was about to begin a new phase of his mission that required a severance from the past which was a kind of death. (pp. 140-41)

Islam appeals to people in many different ways. For Armstrong, the greatest appeal was Sufi philosophy and practice; indeed, she shows great appreciation for the works of Attar and Rumi. However, the greatest Sufi of them all, from her point of view, was the Prophet himself:

Sufis do not retire from the world like Christian monks. The world is their theater of campaign to find God. This spirituality is based on the example of the Prophet himself, who did not retire from the world, but worked incessantly to reorganize his society. (p. 261)

In the final chapter, she tries to understand how Muslims have looked at the Prophet: primarily as a human being, but, like a gem among stones, the epitome of the perfect man. This explains why there was such widespread resentment in the Muslim world over *The Satanic Verses*.

There are two major flaws with this book. The first is her methodology. Although she clearly approaches her subject with *verstehen* ([understanding] Weber 1908), she makes an effort, which looks more like a pretense in light of her empathy, to keep her distance and remain aloof in the fashion of an objective social science observer. Her empathy towards the Prophet notwithstanding, it seems that this objectivity requires the obscuring of the divine by attributing all of the Prophet's decisions and successes to his genius and as reactions to the history he was making. While she refers to the Qur'an as revealed in response to specific occasions, the reduction of divine revelation to human genius or transcendental experience raises some questions. How was it that an illiterate and ordinary man with no prior experience, inkling, or direction became a "genius" author, reformer, military campaigner, and, in the end, a victorious ruler?

Also, what exactly does "transcendental experience" mean? Can we attribute the emergence of these qualities to this experience? Perhaps transcendental experience may make a person self-sacrificing and devoted to a cause, but does it explain how one becomes a "genius" military strategist, a visionary of peace, a designer and originator of a completely novel social order? Can it foretell one's ultimate success ("Your end will be far better than your beginning" [Qur'an 93:3])? If she believes that the Prophet had a transcendental experience with God, then how logical is it to brush God aside?

Second, while exhorting Europe to accept that "Islam is not going to disappear or wither away" (p. 265), Armstrong observes that because of Islam's apparent impotence before the West and its triumphant secularism, there is a religious crisis in the Muslim world and some Muslims are experiencing dread and dismay. Their response is to turn to a new radical form of Islam: so-called fundamentalism.

The very use of this term is unfortunate, for, as the author knows, there is no fundamentalism in Islam. Even Muslims do not know who these "fundamentalists" are. Fundamentalism is a rather loosely used term that creates images of the Christian fundamentalist movements of the American South. There is hardly anything in common between Christian fundamentalists (i.e., Billy Graham, Jimmy Swaggart, Pat Robertson, Jim Bakker, and Jerry Falwell) (Ba-Yunus 1992) and Muslims. One can attach any label to a given phenomenon as long as the term is explained. To use a term that already has a generally agreed upon meaning and then to use it indiscriminately in a completely different context creates confusion.

Moreover, are these "fundamentalists" really turning to a "new radical form of Islam"? Hardly. In fact, the movement to revive the golden age of the *khilāfah* dates back to the day it was demolished. The first person to die for this cause was Ḥusayn, the Prophet's grandson. As Armstrong herself notes: "Abu Bakr had told Muslims it was their duty to depose him (their ruler) if he failed to rule correctly" (p. 261). But, to be fair, it may be said that this movement has never had such a mass appeal in the Muslim world as it does today. Also, few people in the Muslim world would disagree with the author that Europe and the West have a great deal of explaining to do as to why these old feelings are now percolating throughout the Muslim world.

Some Muslims may find other faults in this book. However, those who might blame her for not attaining the *mi'rāj* must not belittle the fact that of all the non-Muslim Islamicists, she is the one who made the farthest journey, for she went back to the earliest sources of the Prophet's history and mission. This book, which may also serve as an authentic bibliography of western writings on this subject, is especially good for non-Muslims who want to acquire a better understanding of Islam. Muslims active in *da'wah* should also have it in their personal library.

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