

Muslims need more creative voice

Karen Armstrong has studied religions for more than two decades and what she has learnt from her scholarship is not difference, but compassion. ANIZA DAMIS speaks to her about Muslims, and why she is a passionate defender of Islam

Q: You are constantly talking about how Islam is spoken of negatively, and you defend it. Why?

A: For many reasons. In my own life, I've known how painful it is to be misrepresented. Second, it offends me intellectually.

It gave me a feeling of dread, because it had been the faceless defamation of the Jews in Europe that had made it possible for Hitler to create the death camps. That was a tremendous shock to European and Western sensibilities. We'd prided ourselves on being an enlightened people. And yet we seem to have learnt nothing from it.

Now, when articles and inaccurate, unfair portrayals, even unconscious defamation of Islam happens, it goes on the airwaves immediately, onto the web, and it convinces Muslims that the West really is Islamophobic and is out to destroy Islam. It revives all these fears, and is a gift to extremists who want to recruit people. We simply cannot afford this kind of inaccurate, distorted view.

Q: You have spent your life studying religion. Do you find it offensive that people think that you don't have credibility to talk about Islam?

A: When Muslims say that, yes. I wouldn't have to do this if Muslims were out there. If Muslims feel that strongly about non-Muslims popping up and speaking, then let these critics of mine — let them speak to the American Congress. Let them try and speak to Western people in a way that Western people can understand. Then people like (American professor of International Studies and Islamic Affairs) John Esposito and me wouldn't be necessary.

Q: So why do you think there aren't any Muslims willing to talk?

A: I've explained to Muslims: "I can't spend the rest of my life explaining your religion for you. There comes a time when it must be over to you". For the older generation, I think it's just difficult for many of them. If you put your

head above the parapet, it's dangerous. If you're a refugee from Iraq, for example, you don't want to stand up in public unnecessarily, and be counted as saying this, that and the other. And I think the atmosphere in the US, especially after Sept 11, 2001 was so unpleasant and that's why people would shrink from it. But people should try.

Q: Is it possible to have a multi-religious community or nation living peacefully? Or do you need secularism as a base or at its centre to make it work?

A: Under Islam in the past, there were harmonious communities living together, famously in Muslim Spain, which was unique. There's nothing like it in the rest of Europe. Similarly, the first period of Jerusalem's history was light years away from anything we have got today. (The caliph) Omar, when he conquered Jerusalem, brought the Jews back. They hadn't been allowed to live there under Christian rule. And there was a Christian majority in Jerusalem until the time of the Crusades. It was known as the City of Dhimmis (non-Muslims).

Q: But these days, the Dhimmis believe that you would not be equal unless you are treated as equals.

A: Yes. The Dhimmi system wouldn't work today. We don't have the kind of economies that can support an egalitarian ideal. That's important, too. It's not just a question of us all becoming more civilised and nicer people — you need the economic basis for it. There must be absolute equality, one person one vote. And that is probably the best way of achieving (a harmonious society). But there's always going to be tension.

Q: How would you advise a Muslim majority that it has to adjust the concept of a Muslim state?

A: This is one of the big questions occupying the Muslim world now, not just Malaysia. Because of the impetus in the Quran, how do you create a modern Muslim state? There is yet no solution. There are various models, and it's a difficult thing. But just because it's difficult doesn't mean it's not possible.

Q: More particularly since 9/11, Muslims have felt under siege from the non-Muslim world. Is this justified?



KAREN ARMSTRONG

A: Yes. They are right to be afraid. If I were a Muslim in the United States, Europe or the Middle East, if I were Iraqi or Palestinian, I would feel besieged. And the way it is presented in the Western press, Islam is often very unpleasant. The difficulty is Muslims have got to be creative about it. Because when people feel they are being besieged, then up come the barricades.

Q: Muslims are reacting violently to things they disagree with. But while there are those who are politicised and willing to go out and make themselves heard, there are also those who live quietly.

A: Well, I have to say, the press is largely responsible for this. During the Danish cartoon crisis, a poll found that 97 per cent of youth were offended by the cartoons but they were also appalled by the violence of some of the protesters. And that voice was not picked up at all. Because it's not news.

And that is what repeatedly happens. I saw it in New York after 9/11, when a fatwa was issued giving Muslims permission to fight other Muslims in the war against terror. That was not published in the *New York Times*, even though imam Faisal Rauf asked for it to be. You don't get the moderate voice represented fairly in the media.

Q: Where does throwing a tantrum come from? When Muslims were objecting (during the Danish caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad), protesters were threatening to kill people.

A: Well, a few criminals do this. These people are not Muslims, they're criminals, I'm sorry. The vast majority of Muslims are not threatening to kill anybody.

Q: How is it possible to find a Muslim voice that is going to reach out to people in a peaceable way?

A: There are plenty of them around, g_news@nst.com.my

And if they don't get the same media coverage as the others, that's not their fault.

Q: You talk about the "militantly pious". How can "moderate Muslims" push forward compassion and justice? How do you speak above the cacophony of the militants?

A: The militant ones are a minority. Even those who might feel threatened by modernity — some would call them "fundamentalists" — only a tiny proportion would take part in acts of terror. What I would like to see is people finding more imaginative ways to speak to the non-Muslim world, to catch the imagination of the time and the media. This will take creativity.

Q: The problem is not just between Muslims and the West but also between Muslims and Muslims. There are Muslims who are, perhaps, insecure in their identities, and they are trying to push that forward.

A: Don't think that Muslims are alone in having internecine quarrels. Muslims have the added difficulty of the so-called, misnamed, "war against terror". Culture is always contested. It's always the case that some people have a different idea of how they want to see their country from the mainstream. You have to expect this and deal with it in a creative adult manner.

It's no good trying to force people to do anything — that is un-Muslim. When you try to thrust something down someone's throat, they will become more extreme and more belligerent. And so, on both sides, the problem escalates. The only way is for the so-called "liberals" to try to listen, really listen, to the fear and anxiety that lies underneath some of these hardline positions. These are anxieties that no society can safely ignore or avoid.

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