

Moral excellence of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and Orientalist Karen Armstrong

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ABSTRACT:

Praise be to Allah who revealed to us the curriculum, and brought us out from darkness to light, and showered on us the example of the Prophet's guidance to follow. The Quran says, "Ye have indeed in the Messenger of Allah a beautiful pattern (of conduct) for any one whose hope is in Allah and the Final Day".¹ A Muslim belief is there is no God except the one true God and Muhammad is the messenger and slave of God. This belief keeps the vision broad and gives social, moral and scientific standards. When belief is removed from the heart, mind and the soul, the balance of nature get disturbed and the aim of life get lost. In the pre- Islamic era the Arabs were ignorant of divine guidance, the society was suffered from oppressive paganism, and general decadence. Almighty God sent Prophet Muhammad at a time when the people of the book had deviated from the straight path, and the pagans and idol worshipers were living in ignorance. The article, "Moral excellence of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and Orientalist Karen Armstrong" focuses on some aspects of

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the moral decline of the pre Islamic Arabs, the prophet Muhammad's moral excellence and how the western writer Karen Armstrong² found him in different moral values.

Morality is a sense of behavioural conduct that differentiates between the good and bad; intentions, decisions, and actions. A moral is any one practice or teaching within a moral code.³

The Quran explain divine rules for morality in the words, “to believe in Allah and the Last Day, and the Angels, and the Book, and the Messengers; to spend of your substance, out of love for Him, for your kin, for orphans, for the needy, for the wayfarer, for those who ask, and for the ransom of slaves; to be steadfast in prayer, and practice regular charity; to fulfil the contracts which ye have made; and to be firm and patient, in pain (or suffering) and adversity, and throughout all periods of panic. Such are the people of truth, the Allah fearing”.⁴

Orient means east, the direction from where the sun rises. The word orient is used for Asians, as they are living in the East.⁵ Orientalism thus, is a term used for the imitation or depiction of Eastern cultures, values, knowledge, arts, histories, languages and societies in the West by writers, designers artists and scholars.⁶ Different orientalists wrote about Prophet Muhammad and his character. The orientalist Michael H. Hart in his book, *The 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Persons in History*, says, “My choice of Muhammad to lead the list of the world’s most influential persons may surprise some readers and may be questioned by others, but he was the only man in history who was supremely successful on both the religious and secular level.”⁷ The chief orientalist of the article is Karen Armstrong, a popular British author of numerous works

on debate surrounding issues in comparative religion. She portrayed the historical narrative of Muhammad (PBUH) in her books.

Prophet Muhammad,⁸ the founder of Islam, regarded as the last messenger of God, was by nature gentle and kind-hearted, always inclined to be gracious and to overlook the faults of others. Politeness and courtesy, compassion and tenderness, simplicity and humility, sympathy and sincerity were some of the keynotes of his character. Almighty God confirmed his morals in the Quran as, “And thou (standest) on an exalted standard of character”.⁹ The Quran in another verse says, “We have sent you out of mercy from us towards the whole world”.¹⁰ Hazrat Sa'ad bin Hisham bin `Aamir said, "I came to Ayesha and said, `Umm al-Mu'mineen! Kindly tell me about the high morals of the Messenger of Allah.' She said, “His Morality is Quran”. Further she said, `Did you not read in the Holy Quran, the word of Allah the most honoured and high, you surely possess high moral excellences’.¹¹

Karen Armstrong says, “Muhammad was a man who faced an absolutely hopeless situation. There was a whole continent virtually of people killing one another in an endless hopeless vendetta, going down a chute of violence and warfare. Feeling that society was coming to an end and had no hope. He gave them hope single-handedly. In a space of 23 years he brought peace and new hope to Arabia and a new beacon for the world”.

Prophet Muhammad highly speaks about the importance of morality to his believers and said, “Nothing that will be weighed on the Day of Judgement will weigh heavier than moral action”.¹² In the hadith he gave us an indication how to judge righteousness by saying, "Righteousness is

good morality, and wrongdoing is that which wavers in your soul and which you dislike people finding out about".¹³ Abdullah bin Amr ibn Al-Aas related that the Messenger said, "Allah grants mercy to the merciful. Be merciful to those who are on the earth, (then) He who is above the heavens will be merciful to you".¹⁴ Similarly he said, "He whose neighbor is not safe from his misconduct shall not enter Paradise".¹⁵ "He who believes in Allah and the Day of Judgment should not disturb his neighbor".¹⁶

Karen Armstrong says, "One of the constituent elements of the Islamic Mission was to enshrine mercy and pity and promote their feeling in the Islamic society from the start."¹⁷

Prophet Muhammad mercy was equally showered on animals and he said, "Do not withhold the superfluous water, for that will prevent people from grazing their cattle."¹⁸ Similarly in another hadith narrated by Abu Huraira, the prophet said, "While a man was walking he felt thirsty, he went down a well and drank water from it. On coming out of it, he saw a dog panting and eating mud because of excessive thirst. The man said, 'This (dog) is suffering from the same problem as that of mine. So he (went down the well), filled his shoe with water, caught hold of it with his teeth and climbed up and watered the dog. Allah thanked him for his (good) deed and forgave him". The people asked, "O Allah's Apostle! Is there a reward for us in serving (the) animals?" He replied, "Yes, there is a reward for serving any animate".¹⁹

Karen Armstrong says: "Down the centuries we have envisioned Muhammad as a sullen and surly man, a tough warrior and a cool, calculating politician. But he was an incredibly compassionate and

sensitive soul. He loved animals, for instance. When he found a cat sleeping on his gown he let her sleep on and hated to disturb her (it is even reported that he cut his only gown round the bit where the cat was sleeping in order not to wake or disturb it). It is often said that one criterion of social progress lies in a society's attitude to animals. All religions prompt people to love and respect the natural world, and Muhammad tried to teach Muslims to do just that... He prohibited the branding of animals in a way that hurt them, and he banned all animal fights”.²⁰

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) smiled often and would make jokes with members of his community. For example, an old woman came to him and said: "O Messenger of Allah, pray to God that I will enter Paradise". He replied jokingly, "O Mother of so-and-so, no old women will enter Paradise". The old woman went away crying, after hearing this. Then the Prophet sent one of his companions to tell her that, she will enter Paradise by becoming a young lady, because the Quran says²¹ the dwellers of Paradise will be young. The Prophet was very kind to kids, he said, "When I stand for prayer, I intend to prolong it but on hearing the cries of a child, I cut it short, as I dislike troubling the child's mother”.²²

Karen Armstrong Says, Muhammad (PBUH) was an example to follow. It is reported that one day he saw a bond boy doing some hard work. He sneaked up behind him and put his hands on the boy's eyes like children playfully do. The bond boy said it must be the Prophet, for no one else would think of easing his hardship with such an amicable gesture”.²³

Prophet Muhammad's whole life is an example of patience, when his son Ibrahim died, his hope completely crumbled. With tears in his eyes he talked to the dead child: "O Ibrahim, were the truth not certain that the last of us will join the first, we would have mourned you even more than we do now." A moment later he said: "The eyes send their tears and the heart is saddened, but we do not say anything except that which pleases our Lord. Indeed, O Ibrahim, we are bereaved by your departure from us".²⁴

Prophet Muhammad served model modesty defined in the Quran, "That Home of the Hereafter We shall give to those who intend not high-handedness or mischief on earth: and the end is (best) for the righteous."²⁵ It is reported on the authority of `Umar that the Prophet forbade going to extremes in praising him, as he said: "Do not extol as the Christians extolled the son of Maryam, for I am just His slave, so say, the slave of Allah and His Messenger".²⁶ He always prayed for protection from pride.

Karen Armstrong talks about her second biography on the prophet, entitled Muhammad: A Prophet for Our Time and warns against what she calls the "myth of Islam as a chronically violent religion."When the Pope spoke of jihad, and when Danish cartoonists published caricatures of a violent prophet Muhammad, Karen Armstrong termed "Islamophobia".

Karen Armstrong Says, Muhammad took Mecca without shedding a drop of blood. He destroyed the idols around the Kabah, rededicated it to Allah, the one God, and gave the old pagan rites of the hajj, an Islamic significance by linking them to the story of Abraham, Hagar and

Ismail.²⁷

Prophet Muhammad prayed and preached the teachings of Islam as the complete code of life. He acted on the words of the Quran, “Call to the way of your Lord with wisdom and goodly exhortation, and have disputations with them in the best manner; surely your Lord best knows those who go astray from His path, and He knows best those who follow the right way”.²⁸ He preached to all Muslims and his family the same strong believes. In a hadith he advised his daughter Fatimah, when she complained about the bad effect of the stone hand-mill on her hand, to say every day ‘Subhan Allah’ (glory be to Allah) thirty three times, ‘Alhamdulillah’ (all gratitude is due to Allah) thirty three times, and ‘Allahu Akbar’ (Allah is greatest) thirty four times, for that is better than a servant”.²⁹ That is why the Quran says, “Ye have indeed in the Messenger of Allah a beautiful pattern (of conduct) for any one whose hope is in Allah and the Final Day, and who engages much in the Praise of Allah”.³⁰

Karen says, Muhammad was never venerated as a divine figure, but he was held to be the Perfect Man. His surrender to God had been so complete that he had transformed society and enabled the Arabs to live together in harmony.³¹

Prophet Muhammad has assigned a position of dignity and honour to woman. Such beneficent regulation is essential for peace, comfort, happiness, continuation of the species and progress.³² The Pre Islamic Arabs used to bury their daughters alive. Polygamy was very common in Arab society.³³ Adultery was more common than legal marriages. Family structure had been destroyed.³⁴ Zihar was the practice by which the men

utter the words "Thou are to me as the back of my mother". Customarily, it set them free from their responsibilities but did not set her free to remarry. The Qur'an condemns these evil practices and says, "None can be their mothers except those who gave them birth".³⁵ The ultimate purpose of marriage in Islam is to win the pleasure of Allah, through chastity, fulfilment, contentment and continuation of the species.³⁶ Plurality of wives is not specifically prohibited by divine command in any religion; except in the case of Islam, which restricts their number to four; and the permission is conditioned by just treatment of the wives.³⁷

Karen Armstrong presented her views about the West that, "Perhaps one of the ugliest tragedies inflicted on women by the call for women liberation in the West is bolting the door firmly against the idea of marriage".³⁸

The Prophet had great reverence and respect to his family, he once even said that the members of his family, together with the Qur'an, constitute the two things which he will leave behind, and which, if people follow them, will never lead them astray.³⁹ Bibi Aisha narrated, that the Prophet used to mention Bibi khadija very often, and whenever he slaughtered a sheep, he would cut its parts and send them to the friends of Bibi khadija.⁴⁰ Similarly another hadith says, "I saw the Prophet, making for Bibi Safiyyah bin hayi a kind of cushion with his cloak behind him (on his camel). He then sat beside the camel and put his knee for Safiyyah to put her foot on, in order to ride (on the camel)".⁴¹

Karin Armstrong said: "Muhammad (PBUH) was one of those rare men who truly enjoy the company of women. Some of his male companions were astonished by his leniency towards his wives and the

way they stood up to him and answered him back. Muhammad (PBUH) scrupulously helped with the chores, mended his own clothes and sought out the companionship of his wives. He often liked to take one of them on an expedition, and would consult them and take their advice seriously. On one occasion his most intelligent wife, Bibi Umm Salamah, helped to prevent a mutiny".⁴²

Karen Armstrong further says, "Muhammad (PBUH) tried to teach Muslims by example, to educate them into showing more respect for women. The fact that people kept up the traditions he instituted for them is sufficient proof that they had fully accepted his Mission. This is particularly important because it happened at a time when most people in most religions denounced the attention a great prophet gave to housework".⁴³

Lineage and inherited merit determined the individual's status in Pre-Islamic tribal society. The Islam challenged the older, pre-Islamic notions of both kinship and inherited merit.⁴⁴ The Quran says, "To humans belong only what they strive for".⁴⁵ Whereas Muhammad (PBUH) had woven them in the new bond of brotherhood. He advised in a hadith, "A believer is like a brick for another believer, the one supporting the other".⁴⁶ In another hadith he said, "The similitude of believers in regard to mutual love, affection, and fellow-feeling is that of one body; when any limb of it aches, the whole body aches, because of sleeplessness and fever".⁴⁷

The prophet instructed for justice and Quran says, "O ye who believe! Stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to Allah, even as against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin, and whether it be (against) rich

or poor: for Allah can best protect both. Follow not the lusts (of your hearts), lest ye swerve, and if ye distort (justice) or decline to do justice, verily Allah is well-acquainted with all that ye do".⁴⁸ Bibi Aisha narrated the hadith, "The people before you were destroyed because they used to inflict the legal punishments on the poor and forgive the rich. By Him in Whose Hand my soul is! If Bibi Fatima (the daughter of the Prophet) did that (i.e. stole), I would cut off her hand".⁴⁹ Narrated Anas that, "I served the Prophet for ten years, and he never said to me, "Uf" (a minor word denoting impatience).⁵⁰ Allah in the Quran says, "And indeed, you are of a great moral character".⁵¹

Poverty, charity, and generosity provide keys to the transition between jahiliyya and early Islam.⁵² Interest on a loan is a common practice of Jahiliyya. The Quran says, "That which ye lay out for increase through the property of people will have no increase with Allah. But that which ye lay out for charity, seeking the Countenance of Allah; will get a recompense multiplied".⁵³ The Quran insisted upon right, which inheres in property. It says, "And those in whose wealth is a recognised right".⁵⁴ Prophet Muhammad said, "God has laid the obligation of Alms (Zakat) on their possessions of the rich and return them to the poor";⁵⁵

Karen Armstrong says, "Muhammad was coming to warn the people of Mecca and the surrounding countryside and his own tribe of Quraysh that unless they pulled themselves together and started creating a more just and decent society, restoring the old tribal values of looking after the poor, the orphan, the widow, the oppressed, then there was going to be a terrible catastrophe.

The powerful in the Pre Islamic Arabia, crushed the oppressed. Men

were more brutal and cruel than animals. It was a time when bloodshed was considered as a virtue. The Quran says, "Hold to forgiveness; command what is right".⁵⁶ Allah addressed the Prophet and said, "Therefore patiently persevere, as did (all) apostles of inflexible purpose; and be in no haste about the (Unbelievers)".⁵⁷ Prophet Muhammad gave the concept of Jihad, meaning a struggle to purify; his own soul by self accountability; verbal Jihad, to strive for justice through words and physical force in defence of Muslims against oppression and transgression by the enemies of Allah, Islam and Muslims. The Quran says, "Muhammad is the apostle of Allah. And those who are with him are strong against Unbelievers, (but) compassionate amongst each other".⁵⁸

Karen Armstrong writes: "Fighting and warfare might sometimes be necessary, but it was only a minor part of the whole jihad or struggle. A well-known tradition (hadith) has Muhammad said on returning from a battle, 'We return from the little jihad to the greater jihad,' the more difficult and crucial effort to conquer the forces of evil in oneself and in one's own society in all the details of daily life".⁵⁹ She further says, "After the Hijrah, the Quran started to lie down and develop specific legislations for the just war. For war is indeed necessary sometimes to maintain moral values". Armstrong adds. "Had it not been for some religious people who defended themselves and stood up to aggression, all their places of worship would have been desecrated and destroyed?"⁶⁰

In the present day, Sayyid Qutb conceived the modern world as a *new jahiliyya*, Western knowledge for him is being "ignorant" because it removes the human mind and the divine law. Qutb calls on Muslims to

imitate Muhammad and destroy the *new jahiliyya* as the Prophet did.⁶¹ He promoted the idea of a pan-Islamic state, governed solely by the Islamic law, as an idea whose time has come, in an era of trans-national ideologies. He argues that all contemporary societies returned to state of *jahiliyya* or pre-Islamic ignorance, in which authority and primacy of God have been replaced by other sources of authority.⁶²

The British theological scholar Karen Armstrong supports his views and started her book, the Biography of Muhammad, from discussing the western stereotypes about Muhammad (PBUH) and Islam and named the first chapter as, “Muhammad the enemy”. There she overviewed and replied to the distorted ideas and hate-filled images of the Prophet promulgated in the west over the centuries.

Karen further says: "We often imagine Muhammad (PBUH) in the West as a military leader wielding his sword to impose Islam on reluctant societies. Nothing can be farther from the truth. Muhammad (PBUH) and the Muslim pioneering forefathers were only struggling to stay alive.⁶³" She added, “Many Christians today approve of the concept of the just war," she goes on to say, "because they know that taking up arms against the likes of Hitler and Sese Siko is the only effective way. That is why Islam does not passively turn the other cheek but actively fights tyranny and oppression."⁶⁴

Armstrong in her book, “Muhammad: The Prophet of our time” demonstrates that Muhammad's life has genuine relevance to the global crises we face today. Karen Armstrong said in an interview by Omayma Abdel-Latif "Muslims can run a modern state in an Islamic way, and this is what the West has got to see... There are all kinds of ways in which

people can be modern, and Muslims should be allowed to come to modernity on their own terms and make a distinctive Islamic contribution to it".⁶⁵ She further says, "They thought I am an apologist for Muslims, because my article was about the prophet as a peacemaker, and this did not suit their agenda. But people need to know that Islam is a universal religion, and that there is nothing aggressively oriental or anti-Western about it".⁶⁶

Conclusion

The transition from Jahiliyya to Islam was accompanied by considerable changes in the ideas and perceptions of the traditional tribal society of the Arabs. Thus some concepts of the Jahiliyya did, however, survive among the Arab tribes. Prophet Muhammad retains and promotes certain cultural values held to be consonant with its world-view, transforms others, and categorically rejects those that are in direct contravention of its own. Muhammad in the Islamic era continued to speak highly of the "Hilf al-Fudul" because of the values of generosity, hospitality, chivalry and compassion for the poor and the helpless that this pact upheld.⁶⁷ His revolutionary deeds started from paganism and idolatry to submission to the One True God, from tribal quarrels and wars to national solidarity and cohesion, from drunkenness and debauchery to sobriety and piety, from lawlessness and anarchy to disciplined living, from utter bankruptcy to the highest standards of moral excellence.

In my views Karen Armstrong offers a balanced portrait of the prophet. She was very true and honest in her writings. Her mind was open and free from all kind of prejudices and her approach was real, and her personality was brave. She assessed the life of the prophet (PBUH) in his

context and in the situation of his time according to his environment and enlightened Muhammad's pious ideas, to make the tenets of Islam clear and accessible for modern readers of all faiths. Karen Says in her interview that, "It is very nice that people think that the book was written by a Muslim," she says, "but what a religious scholar tries to do is to enter into a religion by a leap of the imagination, in order to understand not just the beliefs, or the history and doctrine, but also the underlying feel of the religion, and I try to do this with all religions and not just with Islam. I did the same when I wrote the history of Judaism, and I am doing the same now that I am writing a biography of the Buddha".⁶⁸

Notes and References

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