

by **ANDREA BISTRICH**

Karen Armstrong was a Catholic nun for seven years before leaving her order and going to Oxford. Today, she is amongst the most renowned theologians and has written numerous bestsellers on the great religions and their founders. She is one of the 18 leading group members of the Alliance of Civilizations, an initiative of the former UN General Secretary, Kofi Anan, whose purpose is to fight extremism and further dialogue between the western and Islamic worlds. She talks here to the German journalist, Andrea Bistrich, about politics, religion, extremism and commonalities.

ANDREA BISTRICH: 9/11 has become the symbol of major, insurmountable hostilities between Islam and the West. After the attacks many Americans asked: "Why do they hate us?" And experts in numerous round-table talks debated if Islam is an inherently violent religion. Is this so?

KAREN ARMSTRONG: Certainly not. There is far more violence in the Bible than in the Qur'an; the idea that Islam imposed itself by the sword is a Western fiction, fabricated during the time of the Crusades when, in fact, it was Western Christians who were fighting brutal holy wars against Islam. The Qur'an forbids aggressive warfare and permits war only in self-defence; the moment the enemy sues for peace, the Qur'an insists that Muslims must lay down their arms and accept whatever terms are offered, even if they are disadvantageous. Later, Muslim law forbade Muslims to attack a country where Muslims were permitted to practice their faith freely; the killing of civilians was prohibited, as were the destruction of property and the use of fire in warfare.

The sense of polarization has been sharpened by recent controversies — the Danish cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad, over the Pope's remarks about Islam, over whether face-veils hinder integration. All these things have set relations between Islam and the West on edge. Harvard-Professor Samuel Huntington introduced the theory of a "clash of civilizations" we are witnessing today. Does such a fundamental incompatibility between the "Christian West" and the "Muslim World" indeed exist?

The divisions in our world are not the result of religion or of culture, but are politically based. There is an imbalance of power in the world, and the powerless are beginning to challenge the hegemony of the Great Powers, declaring their independence of them—often using religious language to do so. A lot of what we call "fundamentalism" can often be seen as a religious form of nationalism, an assertion of identity. The old 19th-century European nationalist ideal has become tarnished and has always been foreign to the Middle East. In the Muslim world people are redefining themselves according to their religion in an attempt to return to their roots after the great colonialist disruption.

What has made Fundamentalism, seemingly, so predominant today?

The militant piety that we call "fundamentalism" erupted in every single major world faith in the course of the twentieth century. There is fundamentalist Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, Sikhism, Hinduism and Confucianism, as well as fundamentalist Islam. Of the three monotheistic religions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—Islam was the last to develop a fundamentalist strain during the 1960s.

Fundamentalism represents a revolt against secular modern society, which separates religion and politics. Wherever a Western secularist government is established, a religious counterculturalist protest movement rises up alongside it in conscious rejection. Fundamentalists want to bring God/religion from the sidelines to which they have been relegated in modern culture and back to centre stage. All fundamentalism is rooted in a profound fear of annihilation: whether Jewish, Christian or Muslim, fundamentalists are convinced that secular or liberal society wants to wipe them out. This is not paranoia: Jewish fundamentalism took two major strides forward, one after the Nazi Holocaust, the second after the Yom Kippur War of 1973. In some parts of the Middle East, secularism was established so rapidly and aggressively that it was experienced as a lethal assault.

The fact that fundamentalism is also a phenomenon in politics was stressed only recently by former US president Jimmy Carter when he voiced his concerns over the increasing merging of religion and state in the Bush administration, and the element of fundamentalism in the White House. Carter sees that traits of religious fundamentalists are also applicable to neo-conservatives. There seems to be a major controversy between, on the one hand, so called hard-liners or conservatives and, on the other, the progressives. Is this a typical phenomenon of today's world?

The United States is not alone in this. Yes, there is a new intolerance and aggression in Europe too as well as in Muslim countries and the Middle East. Culture is always-and has always been-contested. There are always people who have a different view of their country and are ready to fight for it. American Christian fundamentalists are not in favour of democracy; and it is true that many of the Neo-Cons, many of whom incline towards this fundamentalism, have very hard-line, limited views. These are dangerous and difficult times and when people are frightened they tend to retreat into ideological ghettos and build new barriers against the "other". Democracy is really what religious people call "a state of grace." It is an ideal that is rarely achieved, that has constantly to be reaffirmed, lest it be lost. And it is very difficult to fulfil. We are all-Americans and Europeans-falling short of the democratic ideal during the so called "war against terror."

Could you specify the political reasons that you identified as the chief causes of the growing divide between Muslim and Western societies?

In the Middle East, modernization has been impeded by the Arab/Israeli conflict, which has become symbolic to Christian, Jewish and Muslim fundamentalists and is the bleeding heart of the problem. Unless a just political solution can be found that is satisfactory to everybody, there is no hope of peace. There is also the problem of oil, which has made some of these countries the target of Western greed. In the West, in order to preserve our strategic position and cheap oil supply, we have often supported rulers-such as the shahs of Iran, the Saudis and, initially, Saddam Hussein-who have established dictatorial regimes which suppressed any normal opposition. The only place where people felt free to express their distress has been the mosque.

The modern world has been very violent. Between 1914 and 1945, seventy million people died in Europe as a result of war. We should not be surprised that modern religion has become violent too; it often mimics the violence preached by secular politicians. Most of the violence and terror that concerns us in the Muslim world has grown up in regions where warfare, displacement and conflict have been traumatic and have even become chronic: the Middle East, Palestine, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kashmir.

In regard to the Arab-Israeli-conflict you have said that for Muslims it has become,

"a symbol of their impotence in the modern world." What does that really mean?

The Arab-Israeli conflict began, on both sides, as a purely secular conflict about a land. Zionism began as a rebellion against religious Judaism and at the outset most Orthodox rabbis condemned Zionism as a blasphemous secularization of the Land of Israel, one of the most sacred symbols of Judaism. Similarly the ideology of the PLO was secular-many of the Palestinians, of course, are Christian. But unfortunately the conflict was allowed to fester; on both sides the conflict became sacralized and, therefore, far more difficult to sort out.

In most fundamentalist movements, certain issues acquire symbolic value and come to represent everything that is wrong with modernity. In Judaism, the secular state of Israel has inspired every single fundamentalist movement, because it represents so graphically the penetration of the secular ethos into Jewish religious life. Some Jewish fundamentalists are passionately for the state of Israel and see it as sacred and holy; involvement in Israeli politics is a sacred act of tikkun, restoration of the world; making a settlement in the occupied territories is also an act of tikkun and some believe that it will hasten the coming of the Messiah. But the ultra-Orthodox Jews are often against the state of Israel: some see it as an evil abomination (Jews are supposed to wait for the Messiah to restore a religious state in the Holy Land) and others regard it as purely neutral and hold aloof from it as far as they can. Many Jews too see Israel as a phoenix rising out of the ashes of Auschwitz-and have found it a way of coping with the Shoah.

But for many Muslims the plight of the Palestinians represents everything that is wrong with the modern world. The fact that in 1948, 750,000 Palestinians could lose their homes with the apparent approval of the world symbolizes the impotence of Islam in the modern world vis-à-vis the West. The Qur'an teaches that if Muslims live justly and decently, their societies will prosper because they will be in tune with the fundamental laws of the universe. Islam was always a religion of success, going from one triumph to another, but Muslims have been able to make no headway against the secular West and the plight of the Palestinians epitomizes this impotence. Jerusalem is also the third holiest place in the Islamic world, and when Muslims see their sacred shrines on the Haram al-Sharif [the Noble Sanctuary, also known as Temple Mount]-surrounded by the towering Israeli settlements and feel that their holy city is slipping daily from their grasp, this symbolizes their beleaguered identity. However it is important to note that the Palestinians only adopted a religiously articulated ideology relatively late-long after Islamic fundamentalism had become a force in countries such as Egypt or Pakistan. Their resistance movement remained secular in ethos until the first intifada in 1987. And it is also important to note that Hamas, for example, is very different from a movement like al-Qaeda, which has global ambitions. Hamas is a resistance movement; it does not attack Americans or British but concentrates on attacking the occupying power. It is yet another instance of "fundamentalism" as a religious form of nationalism.

The Arab Israeli conflict has also become pivotal to Christian fundamentalists in the United States. The Christian Right believes that unless the Jews are in their land, fulfilling the ancient prophecies, Christ cannot return in glory in the Second Coming. So they are passionate Zionists; but this ideology is also anti-Semitic, because in the Last Days they believe that the Antichrist will massacre the Jews in the Holy Land if they do not accept baptism.

Do you think the West has some responsibility for what is happening in Palestine?

Western people have a responsibility for everybody who is suffering in the world. We are among the richest and most powerful countries and cannot morally or religiously stand by and witness poverty, dispossession or injustice, whether that is happening in Palestine,

Kashmir, Chechnya or Africa. But Western people have a particular responsibility for the Arab-Israeli situation. In the Balfour Declaration (1917), Britain approved of a Jewish homeland in Palestine and ignored the aspirations and plight of the native Palestinians. And today the United States supports Israel economically and politically and also tends to ignore the plight of the Palestinians. This is dangerous, because the Palestinians are not going to go away, and unless a solution is found that promises security to the Israelis and gives political independence and security to the dispossessed Palestinians, there is no hope for world peace.

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