

Karen Armstrong: The Coherence of Her Incoherence

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Karen Armstrong, long famous for her description of Muhammad as the consummate “peacemaker” who “brought together the warring tribes of Arabia,” has assumed the mantle, yet again, not of the Prophet, but of the Prophet’s defender. In an article in *The Guardian* she retells in her inimitable fashion the story of European Christendom’s relations with Islam and with Muslims. In her retelling, the Muslims are innocent victims, and more than innocent victims, likened again and again to the Jews. They are also the only people who provided, in that bright shining moment of European history known as Islamic Spain, the only real tolerance and humanity to be found anywhere in Europe before the modern era. It is a tough job, but Karen Armstrong proves equal to the task. And her real theme is not history, but that Europeans should feel ashamed themselves for showing any signs of wariness or suspicion about the millions of Muslims who now live in Europe, having come among the indigenous Infidels to settle, but not to settle down.

It is curious to see how often in this article Karen Armstrong makes references to examples of historic mistreatment of the Jews. For in her previous books she has exhibited a palpable distaste for Israel, and has attempted on every occasion to pretend that the claims of the “three abrahamic faiths” to Jerusalem are identical in the importance that each attaches to the city (but as a city Jerusalem is not holy in Islam, and never was), and she is fond, in her discussion of “fundamentalisms”—always presented in the plural – to make reference to the one or two examples of what she calls “Jewish

terrorism.” She fails to consider whether or not the assassination of Rabin by a Jewish political opponent, or the mental collapse of Dr. Baruch Goldstein which led him, acting entirely alone and on impulse, to wreak his solitary revenge on those whose victims Goldstein treated every day as a doctor, until he could no longer stand it, really can be compared to the thousands of planned acts, many of them fortunately foiled, and others not, that are part of the world-wide Jihad against completely innocent Infidels, within Muslim lands, and without.

Here is how she begins:

In 1492, the year that is often said to inaugurate the modern era, three very important events happened in Spain. In January, the Catholic monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella conquered the city of Granada, the last Muslim stronghold in Europe; later, Muslims were given the choice of conversion to Christianity or exile. In March, the Jews of Spain were also forced to choose between baptism and deportation. Finally, in August, Christopher Columbus, a Jewish convert to Catholicism and a protege [sic] of Ferdinand and Isabella, crossed the Atlantic and discovered the West Indies. One of his objectives had been to find a new route to India, where Christians could establish a military base for another crusade against Islam. As they sailed into the new world, western people carried a complex burden of prejudice that was central to their identity.

This first paragraph is a scandal, consisting almost entirely of baseless assertions, incredible omissions, and complete fabrications. But it is not inexplicable. For Karen Armstrong history does not exist. It is putty in the hands of the person who writes about history. You use it to make a point, to do good as you see it. And whatever you need to twist or omit is justified by the purity of your intentions – and Karen Armstrong always has the purest of intentions. She knows that

we in the “white Western world” (as some like to call it) fail to understand others. She knows of our deep need to create “the Other” – a psychic need felt exclusively, and with great intensity, apparently, only by us, and never by anyone else. Though Western civilization, a product that was formed from the inheritance of both classical antiquity and of Christianity (which itself has a strong Hebraic element, that it should be called Judeo-Christianity, a word about which some are still self-conscious), has far outstripped any rival in its achievements, collective and by individuals, in art and science, in political and economic thought, in social development, and has really never needed to create the “Other” (the entire business is a reason ideological fashion which is by this point getting long in the seminar and call-for-papers tooth). Indeed, it is Islam which, though Karen Armstrong does not see it, because she knows nothing about Islam (which doesn’t keep her from writing about it, endlessly), has the strongest claim to being based on the need of its Believers for “the Other.” It is in Islam that emphasis is placed constantly on the only division that matters: that between Believer (to whom all loyalty is owed by other Believers, and for whom all transgressions may be forgiven, except that of disloyalty to Islam) and the Unbeliever, or Infidel (who must be opposed, and subjugated if such an Infidel refuses to accept Islam or stands in the way of its spread). That Armstrong fails to see this is extraordinary; it is everywhere in Qur’an, Hadith, and Sira. But she is on a mission: to make us feel guilty about our treatment of Muslims in the past (hence the harping on the Crusades, and the failure to offer the context of those Crusades, or the difference between the Crusades and Jihad). She wants to evoke a guilt that need not exist at all, so that we will, today, be inhibited from responding to Muslim atrocities and the attitudes that promote such atrocities – this she cannot abide.

“In 1492, the year that is often said to inaugurate the modern era...” Who says that the year 1492 inaugurated the modern era?

And what does the phrase “the modern era” mean in any case? The year 1492 was chosen by this lover of symmetries and “three monotheisms” she’s now said to be studying Buddhism as the latest stop in her Spiritual Search) because in that year, in Spain, Jews and Christians and Muslims each acted, or were acted upon, in ways that Karen Armstrong finds useful to both misstate, and exploit. She will not mention what happened before 1492. She will not tell us about the Muslim invasion and conquest of Spain, or about the nearly 700 years of the Reconquista, nor will she tell us when the Jews first came to Spain, long before the Muslim invasion, even before the Visigoths arrived. She will not point out that the Jews were inoffensive victims, and unlike the Muslims, never invaded, never conquered, never held the Christians of Spain in thrall, never posed a threat to the body politic.

In 1492 “the Catholic monarchs conquered Granada, the “last Muslim stronghold in Europe.” What then should we call all those lands in southern and eastern Europe that the Ottomans were at that very moment busy conquering and seizing, including Constantinople, the richest, most populous, most important city in all of Christendom for 800 years (taken by the Turks on a Tuesday – May 29, 1453), and the Balkans (including the then-vast Serbian lands), and what are modern-day Albania, Greece, Rumania, Bulgaria, and they continued to press northward and westward, later seizing much of Hungary and threatening Vienna twice. Were these not parts of Europe, and was not a good deal of Europe, including what had been its most important city for a millennium, Constantinople, firmly in Muslim hands before Granada fell – and after?

But it would not do to remind readers that while the Muslim invaders and conquerors of Spain lost their last “stronghold” in Granada, other Muslim invaders and conquerors were busy at the other end of Europe, seizing lands and subjugating the native populations to the devshirme (the forced levy of Christian children) as well as to the jizyah (the tax on non-

Muslims) and all the other disabilities that, wherever Muslims conquered, were imposed, as part of a clearly elaborated system, and not merely the whim a ruler, on all non-Muslims.

Now having begun with that year 1492, Armstrong has a bit of a problem. It was that year that Jews were forced to be baptized or to leave. But though Granada had fallen, nothing then happened to the Muslims. In fact, they were treated with the same gentleness that all the Mudejares (Spanish Muslims) who had been defeated, in successive campaigns, were always treated by the Christian victors.

Henry Lea, the pioneering historian of the Inquisition, who was hardly looking for ways to exculpate Christianity, describes the generosity with which the defeated Muslims were treated in Granada, and after the prior victories:

It was the Jews against whom was directed the growing intolerance of the fifteenth century and, in the massacres that occurred, there appears to have been no hostility manifested against the Mudejares. When Alfonso de Borja, Archbishop of Valencia (afterwards Calixtus III), supported by Cardinal Juan de Torquemada, urged their [the Mudejars] expulsion on Juan II of Aragon, although he appointed a term for their exile, he reconsidered the matter and left them undisturbed. So when, in 1480, Isabella ordered the expulsion from Andalusia of all Jews who refused baptism and when, in 1486, Ferdinand did the same in Aragon, they both respected the old capitulations and left the Mudejares alone. The time-honored policy was followed in the conquest of Granada, and nothing could be more liberal than the terms conceded to the cities and districts that surrendered. The final capitulation of the city of Granada was a solemn agreement, signed November 25, 1491, in which Ferdinand and Isabella, for themselves, for their son the Infante Juan and for all their successors, received the Moors of all places that should come into the agreement as vassals and natural subjects under the royal protection, and as such to be honored and respected.

Religion, property, freedom to trade, laws and customs were all guaranteed, and even renegades from Christianity among them were not to be maltreated, while Christian women marrying Moors were free to choose their religion. For three years, those desiring expatriation were to be transported to Barbary at the royal expense, and refugees in Barbary were allowed to return. When, after the execution of this agreement, the Moors, with not unnatural distrust, wanted further guarantees, the sovereigns made a solemn declaration in which they swore by God that all Moors should have full liberty to work on their lands, or to go wherever they desired through the kingdoms, and to maintain their mosques and religious observances as heretofore, while those who desired to emigrate to Barbary could sell their property and depart."

It was not until 1502, after difficulties ensued between Spanish authorities, including the famous Cardinal Ximenes (he of the Complutensian Polyglot), and the Muslims (Mudejares) that they were given the choice of expulsion or conversion. And a great many of them pretended to convert, and remained in Spain – far more Muslims were capable of engaging in dissimulation of their faith than were the hapless Jews, who were expelled, in 1492, virtually overnight. It was much later, in 1570, under Philip II, that the Muslims ("Moors") who had remained were finally expelled, having in the meantime risen in revolt.

But Armstrong manages to smuggle in that first, rather ineffective expulsion of 1502: "later [i.e. in a different year altogether] Muslims were given the choice of Christianity or exile." .She does not add, and may not know, that Muslims in Spain after the fall of Granada were not under any danger of expulsion, and it was only when they showed signs of refusing to integrate as asked (and it was assumed that over time they would share the Christian faith, though at first nothing was done to demand such a sign). She may not know,

either, that Muslims in a Spain now everywhere ruled by Christians asked members of the ulema in North Africa (in present-day Morocco) to determine whether they might continue to live under non-Muslim rule, and were told that it was not licit, and it was important for them not to be ruled by non-Muslims, and they must, therefore, return to the Muslim-ruled lands of North Africa. Such details provide a rather different slant on what Karen Armstrong offers – she takes the real tragedy, the overnight expulsion of the hapless and inoffensive Jews, and attempts to make the reader think that the Muslims were equally inoffensive, equally harmless, and treated with equal ferocity, as the Jews. But they were not equally inoffensive, not equally harmless, and not treated with equal ferocity..

First comes the fall of Granada. Then, second in time, and certainly in Karen Armstrong's indignation, came the expulsion of the Jews "In March, the Jews of Spain were also forced to choose between conversion and exile." Note how that "also" is dropped in, as if the real event, the main event, was the nonexistent (in 1492) expulsion of the Moors, which she had taken care to slip into her discussion of the Fall of Granada, so that she could diminish the significance of the expulsion of the Jews. That afterthoughtish "also."

But the Muslims were invaders and conquerors, who had been resisted for 500 years of the Reconquista, and were expelled merely across the Straits of Gibraltar from whence they had come, to live again among fellow Muslims, under Muslim rule. Armstrong never says that. Nor does she point out, as she would if she were trying to compare the quite different treatments of Jews and Muslims, that the Jews of Spain never invaded, never conquered, never represented a threat to the political or social order. And when they were expelled they were not to find refuge, like the Muslims, in lands ruled by co-religionists, but again, to be scattered, to Ottoman domains and to Christian ones, Salonika or Amsterdam, to be

treated indifferently, or kindly, or with contumely, or worse.

Under Muslim rule, despite their sometimes horrendous treatment, as recorded by Maimonides in his "Epistle to the Yemen" (Maimonides fled Islamic Spain for North Africa), the Jews managed to make important cultural contributions as translators (along with Christians), as physicians, and as poets (the name Judah Halevi comes to mind). They were perfectly willing to live in Spain under Christian rule. They did nothing to deserve their expulsion. But Karen Armstrong has sympathy for the Jews only insofar as that sympathy can be transferred to the real objects of her pity, the Muslims, and she will do nothing to cause readers to see the difference in the two cases, one of clear mistreatment, the second a matter of prudence. It took a full decade for the Spanish rulers and clergy, or some of them, to realize that the Muslims, though conquered, were not about to eventually mold into one faith (that faith being Christianity), and their signs of remaining insubmissive and therefore potentially subversive or rebellious could only disturb. It had taken 500 years for the Reconquista. Why should the Spanish Christians, now that they were militarily victorious everywhere, take a chance that the Muslims would not rise in revolt?

And such revolts took place in the sixteenth century, and led, in 1570, under Philip the Second, to a second and more thorough expulsion of those Muslims who had remained in Spain, and feigned outwardly to have accepted Christianity, but had quietly waited to rise in revolt. That is why the real expulsion of the Muslims (Moors) took place not in 1502, but in 1570, nearly 80 years since the fall of Granada which Armstrong appears to believe led ineluctably to the expulsion of the Moors. It did not.

Both Jews and Moors were expelled from Spain, but however determined Armstrong may be to convince us (most unconvincingly) that these were identical historical events, both prompted by the demonization of "the Other" (a

phenomenon which apparently results from the peculiar psychic deficiency of Christian Europe) they were not identical/ The phrase “the expulsion of the Jews and the Moors” comes trippingly off the tongue, but without more, remains an offense to history and the truth.

The third great event, after the conquest of the “last stronghold” of Islam in Europe, and the two “identical” expulsions of identically unthreatening Muslims and Jews – as Armstrong wants us to believe –in that fateful year 1492, was the voyage of Columbus: “In August, Christopher Columbus, a Jewish convert to Catholicism and a protege of Ferdinand and Isabella, crossed the Atlantic and discovered the West Indies.”

Note how casually Armstrong drops in her astonishing remark: Columbus was a “a Jewish convert to Catholicism.” She treats it as a given, and finds no need to offer sources or evidence. But she must. For there is not a single authority on Columbus who has ever claimed this. Not Samuel Eliot Morison. Not Paolo Taviani. Not Salvador de Madariaga. Not all of the hundreds or thousands of scholars who have written about Columbus. What some have suggested or argued, is that Columbus came from a family of Genoese wool merchants, that Jews were prominent in that trade, that there is other evidence that his family originally had been Jewish but generations before had converted (and since, without conversions, and slaughter, the numbers of Jews in Europe would now be not a few million but 200 million, quite a few people must have converted over time). This was Salvador de Madariaga’s argument, and that of others. It convinced Indro Montanelli, the celebrated Italian journalist and popular historian, and he was by nature a skeptic. But that has nothing to do with Columbus himself.

Armstrong offers no authority for her statement. But why should she? Her purpose here is twofold. What better way to establish, in her vulgar, “some-my-best-friends-and-discoverers-of-the-New-World-are-Jewish” way, than to claim

Columbus for the Jews (of course, assuming that people still honor Columbus for his deeds of derring-do, which would exclude the Ward Churchills of this world). At the same time, she can have this "Jewish" Columbus be depicted as part of a larger problem, for now he, that "Jewish convert to Catholicism," has embraced the (non-existent) aggressive military plans of Ferdinand and Isabella. Columbus did not obtain royal support to find a new trading route to the east (now that the Muslim conquests in Byzantium have totally blocked the overland routes), or – as of course he would – along the way to spread the Gospel, but to find the best route to "India, where Christians could establish a military base for another crusade against Islam."

Having been transformed into a "Jewish convert to Catholicism," Columbus can more conveniently be depicted by Armstrong as a Pentagon Proto-Neo-Con, Jewish-but-also-Christian-fundamentalist, off on his voyage to "establish a military base" for "another crusade against Islam." A regular Donald Rumsfeld, negotiating for American bases in Uzbekistan. And Kyrgyzstan.

"A military base for another crusade against Islam" – what can we say? Armstrong appears to believe that the Crusades, which were limited in space to the recapture of the Holy Land, and in time to 200 years (1090-1290, roughly) in fact were some kind of permanent impulse, just the way the unmentionable (in all of Armstrong's copious published vaporings on Islam) Jihad remains a permant and central feature of Islamic teaching. But she is wrong. There was no ongoing effort in 1492 to embark on a new Crusade. Not a word about it, from Columbus, from Luis Santangel, from Los Reyes Catolicos themselves.

And had such a thought occurred to someone, what kind of sense would it have made, militarily, to try to attack from India? Europeans may not have known how far India was from Europe by sea, but they knew that it was very far from the Holy Land (in fact, Columbus thought it was much closer to Europe – that was

his happy miscalculation). By 1492, the southeastern part of Europe itself had been for many decades under constant military assault by the powerful Ottoman armies. A few decades before, the first city of Christendom had fallen to the Ottoman Turks, to the Muslims. How, with such constant dangers, could anyone even think of launching a new Crusade from India? How would tens of thousands of men be transported there, stationed there, and then transported again to the Holy Land? How would they make their way safely through the vast Muslim-controlled lands of Persia, of Mesopotamia, of Syria, in order to reach the Holy Land and fight the Saracens?

Armstrong's nonsense perhaps has to do with some rude and indigestible bits of history that she dimly recalls, about the story of Prester John, the mythical Christian king of a mythical Christian kingdom, placed first, in European imaginations, in India, and later transferred to Ethiopia – a fable, designed to hearten European Christians who were always fearful of Muslim assaults, the Arab raiding parties by sea, up and down European coasts, and the Turkish land armies of the mighty Ottoman Sultan.

Her every word adds to the absurdity. There is no evidence for Armstrong's assertions about Columbus himself, or about what motivated him. History is putty in her hands, we said earlier. But the word putty does not do her infantile approach to history justice. History is for Karen Armstrong not so much putty as Playdoh. She can roll it about, she can pull it apart, she can twist and turn it with the same delight exhibited by a two-year-old when too-too-solid block of Playdoh is finally softened up for use by grown-up hands. But the two-year-old is an innocent at play, and even if he leaves a momentary mess, he has done no real harm. Karen Armstrong is not innocent, and manages to do a great deal of harm, careless or premeditated harm, to history. Too many people read that she has written a few books, and assume, on the basis of nothing, that "she must know what she is talking about" – and

some of the nonsense sticks. And perhaps an enraged professor or two bothers to dismiss her, but mostly – this is how the vast public, in debased democracies, learns its history today. It is hearsay as history – “Karen Armstrong says” or “John Esposito says.”

And that is only her first paragraph.

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