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Reviewed by Christian Troll

Founder of Islam still an enigma

Muhammad: prophet for our time

Karen Armstrong

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Exactly 50 years ago, W. Montgomery Watt in his book *Muhammad at Medina* described Muhammad as "one of the greatest of the 'sons of Adam'" and "a moral and social reformer". "Towards convincing Christian Europe that Muhammad is a moral exemplar ... little, indeed nothing, has so far been accomplished," he noted. Watt went on to ask if Muslims could discover the moral principles needed for a creative contribution to the present world situation by sifting the universal in the life of Muhammad from the particular.

In her elegantly composed and absorbingly narrated story of Muhammad's life and achievements, Karen Armstrong aims at doing just this and even more. She sees Muhammad not only as "a moral exemplar" but also as no less than "Prophet [and not only a prophet] for our time". Her account is based partly on a straightforward and uncritical reading of the work of Muhammad's earliest biographers, taking the Qur'an as her main source of information.

Following Toshihiko Izutzu's groundbreaking study *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an*, she gives an admirable introduction to the key values inspiring Muhammad's life and preaching. She adroitly challenges Muslim extremist readings of the Qur'an and Sira, noting that they correspond strangely to the "Islamophobia in Western culture that dates back to the time of the Crusades" and is kept alive by some sectors of the Western media to this day.

Her view of Muhammad is linked to her belief that on 9/11 the world embarked on a new historical era, requiring a changed outlook. It is with this objective firmly in mind that Armstrong arrives at what seems a contrived interpretation of Muhammad's life: "Muhammad literally sweated with the effort to bring peace to war-torn Arabia, and we need people who are prepared to do this today. His life is a tireless campaign against greed,

injustice, and arrogance ... he wore himself out in the effort to evolve an entirely new solution."

On this reading, Muhammad becomes not the harbinger of a new religion trying "to impose religious orthodoxy" but rather someone out "to change people's hearts and minds". Muhammad's distinctive contribution, "the full significance of his prophetic career", is to have pursued the struggle against violence and retaliation of pre-Islamic Arab life and replaced it with the "ideal of non-violence and reconciliation".

For Armstrong, the violent phase in the career of Muhammad must not be taken as its climax: Muhammad "eventually abjured warfare and adopted a non-violent policy". This statement is bizarre and corresponds to no Muslim account. It is highly questionable also in the light of all the bloodshed during the early history of Islam, starting with the Medinan period of Muhammad's career. Is it really historically convincing to claim that the battles of Muhammad and his immediate successors "had no religious significance"? Or that the first four caliphs, the "rightly guided ones", "in expanding the Arab Islamic empire by diplomatic and military means", were "responding to a political opportunity ... rather than a Qur'anic imperative"? The Qur'an clearly indicates that Muhammad's first great victory, at Badr, was to be understood as an act of divine intervention, vindicating Muhammad in his struggle against the enemies.

Armstrong's biography succeeds in highlighting the extraordinary qualities and achievements of Muhammad as a patriarch, leader of men, political and moral reformer and religious genius, but she fails to do justice to the Qur'an-based religious claims made by Muhammad. He did not only consider himself as the harbinger of an utterly divine summons, he was also convinced that he was the "seal of the prophets", that is, the prophet in whom the revelation of God to humanity reached its perfection and its fulfilment, and that this had been announced to him by Jesus himself.

Armstrong also surely does not take sufficient notice of the considerable differences between Islam and Judaism and Christianity, the two religions based on the Bible. Muhammad tells us very clearly that he is not only a prophet (nabi) but also a messenger (rasul), i.e. the herald of a law revealed to him in order to correct and complete the Bible.

Where Jesus is concerned, Muhammad accepts that he is the Messiah, born of a virgin, and bestows remarkable titles on him. However, these titles do not signify in the Qur'an what they mean in the New Testament. Muhammad was shocked by the central affirmations of Christianity, on matters such as the Trinity, the Divine Sonship of Jesus and the Crucifixion. In conformity with Qur'anic teaching, Muhammad "corrects" or denies all of them.

Christians can perhaps follow the Catholicos Timotheos I who told the Caliph al-Mahdi in the year 781, "Muhammad has followed the path of the

prophets". But a statement along these lines can never satisfy Muslims, for whom he is "the Prophet" par excellence.

But, theologically, Christian believers cannot and should not see Muhammad as a prophet in the biblical sense and even less as a "prophet for our time". Christians may, however, gladly affirm that God has allowed something of the power and truth to be inserted into history through the way Muhammad responded to his vocation, which in our globalised, contemporary world is most adequately exemplified and most powerfully realised by the non-violent ebed Yahwe, Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified and risen Messiah and Lord.