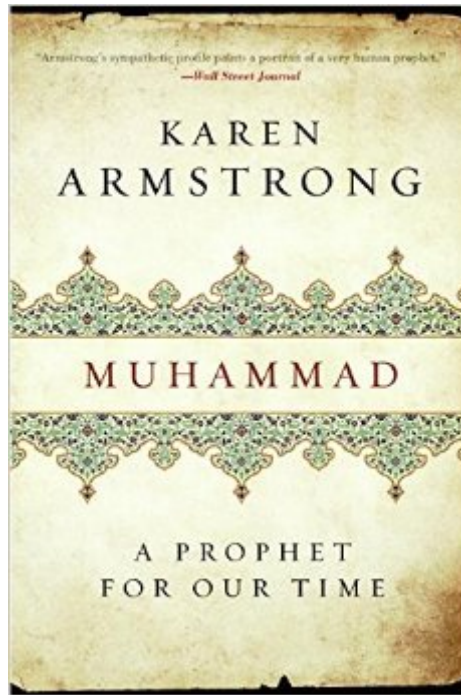


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Muhammad: A Prophet For Our Time



Synopsis

The Man Who Inspired the World's Fastest-Growing Religion Muhammad presents a fascinating portrait of the founder of a religion that continues to change the course of world history. Muhammad's story is more relevant than ever because it offers crucial insight into the true origins of an increasingly radicalized Islam. Countering those who dismiss Islam as fanatical and violent, Armstrong offers a clear, accessible, and balanced portrait of the central figure of one of the world's great religions.

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Customer Reviews

Karen Armstrong's book provides a brief introduction to the life of Mohammed. At the end she offers her motivation: "If we are to avoid catastrophe, Muslim and Christian worlds must learn not merely to tolerate but to appreciate one another." I picked up this book as a lifelong atheist who has never had much sympathy for any religion, although I respect the rights of others to their beliefs. I was looking for information because I am disturbed at the prevalence in the media and elsewhere of hate propaganda against Muslims. If I'm being told I should hate something, I want to know why. Armstrong traces the rise of Islam to an economic revolution that occurred in Arabia in the seventh century, largely due to the growing importance of trade in a nomadic grazing economy. She looks briefly at the rise of monotheism in the newly emerging cities, particularly Mecca, and the emergence of Islam from that as Mohammed's revelations provided a body of scripture for Arab monotheism. Mohammed and others considered his revelations divine, the word of god. In that, he's

not alone, as many religions consider the thoughts of brilliant people among their founders to have been divinely inspired. The poetic nature of Mohammed's revelations and their relevance to the social situation of their time led to their survival, and later followers of Islam used them to understand their own social situations, down to the present time. In this Islam is no different to any other religion. Armstrong describes the decade-long struggle between Mecca and Medina, which was an economic and political struggle that took religious form, and the eventual triumph of the Muslims of Medina. In doing so she disentangles, so far as possible, the secular from the religious aspects of this history and proves that war and conversion by the sword are not necessary parts of Islam, as the peddlars of hate and fear try to claim. Thanks to Karen Armstrong for a brief, careful and clear-headed look at the life of Mohammed and the origins of Islam.

Karen Armstrong has written books on every world religion and many spiritual leaders, I wonder if she is the author of perhaps too many topics, and spread herself thin? In her introduction she compares Muhammad to Gandhi without offering an explanation... Gandhi? Gandhi was in a political disadvantage and used non-violence to bring about radical change. Later in Armstrong's book she states, "No radical social and political change has ever been achieved without bloodshed, and, because Muhammad was living in a period of confusion and disintegration, peace could be achieved only by the sword." This is one example of her many contradictions. She often made statements that assumed her readers were brought up as Christians, and seemed to side with God in her claim that the enemies of Muhammad had perverted the true order. She also made mistakes that led me to question her reliability as a historian. For example, she inferred that the Qu'ran is written in chronological order! (The Qu'ran is ordered from longest to shortest chapters). I would have preferred more source quotes, more historical facts and less conjecture. Her book shows Muhammad in a positive light, which is refreshing, but she seems to be defending his every move, including the historical accounts that are less than holy - the attacks Muhammad made on the Quraysh, Jews, and non-believers was portrayed by Armstrong as pro-active defensive measures... I enjoyed a few passages when Armstrong's personal interludes were kept down to a minimum and the history of a fascinating man and time and place unfolded. It's quite an accomplishment for someone to carve a nation from warring tribes in a harsh and unyielding environment. But for the most part I felt like I had to read between the lines. Definitely not a historical book. Falls into the category of polemics.

Karen Armstrong's *Muhammad: A Prophet for Our Time* directly addresses the central conflict of

our times, "Some Muslim thinkers regard the jihad against Mecca as the climax of Muhammad's career and fail to note that he eventually abjured warfare and adopted a nonviolent policy. Western critics also persist in seeing the Prophet of Islam as a man of war, and fail to see that from the very first he was opposed to the jahili arrogance and egotism that not only fueled the aggression of his time but is much in evidence in some leaders, Western and Muslim alike, today." Karen goes out of her way to present a balanced and fair perspective on the life of Muhammad. She does this by basing her biography on the Prophet's response to al-Jahiliyah: commonly translated as "an Islamic concept of 'ignorance of divine guidance.'" Karen examines more than Jahiliyah's theological significance, going into its practical impact on the culture of the Arabian peninsula. The dominant jahili spirit of the time was arrogant, quick to take an offense, warlike and vengeful. Islam, as practiced and taught by the Prophet, Karen makes clear, was a rejection of all of these traits - usually to the great consternation of his followers: "And the servants of Allah, Most Gracious are those who walk on the earth in humility, and when the ignorant (jahilun) address them, they say, 'Peace!' " (Sura The Criterion 25:63 - translation from *The Qur'an: Text, Translation & Commentary*.) The revelations that form the Qur'an came to Muhammad not always in dreams or trances, but were sometimes aggressive even terrifying experiences. Muhammad describes the nature of revelation as gently falling like rain" and, at other times, traumatically, where he feels his "soul ripped away." After revelation, even the Prophet needed to take time to understand what had been revealed. Karen writes, "[Allah] instructed Muhammad to listen to intently to each revelation as it emerged; he must be careful not to impose a meaning on a verse prematurely, before its full significance had become entirely clear." "High above all is Allah, the King, the Truth! Be not in haste with the Qur'an before its revelation to thee is completed, but say, "O my Lord! advance me in knowledge." (Sura Ta-ha, 20:114) Karen, like others, notes that the Qur'an itself has been structured as high-level Arabic poetry, a concept central to the impact of the Qur'an on its Arabic audiences. This is a point entirely missed by Western audiences. You can get some sense of it by listening to a good chanter reciting the verses, but it's a shallow appreciation at best. Karen describes how listening to "the rich, allusive language and rhythms of the Qur'an helped [the Muslims] to slow down their mental processes and enter a different mode of consciousness." Karen portrays, through the biography, the Qur'an's shared vision of the "people of the book" - the Islamic concept of a shared heritage of monotheism between Muslim, Christian and Jew: "Say: 'We believe in Allah, and in what has been revealed to us and what was revealed to Abraham, Isma'il, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, and in (the Books) given to Moses, Jesus, and the prophets, from their Lord: We make no distinction between one and another among them, and to Allah do we bow our will [lahu muslimun].'" (Sura

The Family Of 'Imran 3:84)In addition to the creed that there's "no God but God" these three great religions believe in a similar destiny and consequently all deserve both tolerance and freedom to practice their faith:"Those who believe (in the Qur'an), those who follow the Jewish (scriptures), and the Sabians and the Christians,- any who believe in Allah and the Last Day, and work righteousness,- on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve." (Sura The Table 5:69)"To thee We sent the Scripture in truth, confirming the scripture that came before it, and guarding it in safety: so judge between them by what Allah hath revealed, and follow not their vain desires, diverging from the Truth that hath come to thee. To each among you have we prescribed a law and an open way. If Allah had so willed, He would have made you a single people, but (His plan is) to test you in what He hath given you: so strive as in a race in all virtues. The goal of you all is to Allah. It is He that will show you the truth of the matters in which ye dispute[.]" (Sura The Table, 5:48)I have a couple of minor complaints. I wish that Karen had used the Qur'anic names for the characters that both the Holy Bible and the Holy Qur'an have in common. For example, Jibr'il for Gabriel; Ibrahim for Abraham; Isa for Jesus; Musa for Moses, and so on. After all, Karen is telling the story of Muhammad and quotes extensively from the Qur'an. It just would have seemed more natural and less distracting to me. Another problem is that the book is edited sloppily in a couple of places: for example on page 43 (of my paper bound edition) a footnote starts out explaining that "Arabs customarily take an honorary title known as the kunya [...] Muhammad was known as" And the footnote ends right there. Whatever Muhammad was known as, was lost somewhere between Karen's word-processor and the printing press. Karen's biography of Muhammad reveals a very human prophet; a man who struggled with his faith, culture, peers and enemies. She strikes a balance between the "easy" teachings of Islam (tolerance, generosity, etc.) and the "hard" teachings, contrasting "jihad" to Augustine's "just war" is a comparison most Christian minds would prefer to avoid. Karen ends the book with some good advice, "If we are to avoid catastrophe, the Muslim and Western worlds must learn not merely to tolerate but to appreciate one another. A good place to start is with the figure of Muhammad [...]" All in all, this was an interesting read, only occasionally "preachy" and a good introduction for those who may want to pursue deeper studies in Islam or the Islamic culture that has so dramatically shaped the Middle East. I wish I'd read it before tackling *In the Footsteps of the Prophet: Lessons from the Life of Muhammad*. It would have made that book a lot clearer.

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