

## Karen Armstrong as a Biographer of Muhammad: A Critical Study of “Muhammad: Prophet for Our Time”

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Author of a number of books on religion and a noted biographer of Muḥammad, Karen Armstrong was a Roman Catholic nun, but later she became a liberal. In her seven years stay at the convent, she had a devastating experience of emotional trauma at the hands of Catholic authoritarianism pervading the atmosphere of her convent. She was so broken, though for good, that she lost herself into unconsciousness only to regain the spirit of a new world of recognition. She set out to do teaching, broadcasting and writing. Known for her academic work on comparative religion, she also penned the biographies of eminent religious figures. “Muhammad: Prophet for Our Time” is her second book on the biography of the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him). Embracing significant aspects of his life, she aims at reconciliation between the Western and Muslim worlds. This research paper gives her perspective as a biographer of Muḥammad focusing on a critical analysis of this book and highlighting its merits and demerits.

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**Key words:** Revelation, jihād, polygamy, tolerance, pluralism, reconciliation,

Born on 14<sup>th</sup> November, 1944 in Worcestershire, England, Karen Armstrong was sent to the Convent of the Holy Child Jesus, Edgbaston in her teens. While still a member of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, she attended St. Anne’s College, Oxford. After her graduation in English, she wanted to pursue D.Phil. on the poet Tennyson, but her dissertation was rejected. Soon, she started her career as an English teacher at James Allen’s Girls’ School, Dulwich, and rose to the headship of the department of English. During her teaching career, she was working on her memoir of convent experiences. “Through The Narrow Gate” appeared in 1981 which gave her a sigh of relief after a long struggle of dissatisfaction and isolation. At the same time, the breakthrough of her life came when she got the opportunity to become a broadcast presenter on television. She made a documentary on St. Paul for “Channel Four.” During this project, she developed interest in comparative study of religions. She kept on writing profusely and a number of books are on her credit now including “A History of God” (1993), “The Battle for God” (2000), “Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet” (1991) and “Muhammad: Prophet for Our Time” (2006).<sup>i</sup>

### “Muhammad: Prophet for Our Time”

Earlier, Armstrong wrote “Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet” which was first published by Victor Gollancz Ltd. in 1991. Kathryn Kueny, an Associate Professor and Director of Religious Studies Program, Fordham University reviews that Armstrong has presented in this book a sympathetic view of the Prophet of Islam and challenged the prejudices the West has set against him. She has tried to undermine the Western intolerance against Islam by inculcating a better understanding of the tradition to which Muslims adhere.<sup>ii</sup>

“Muhammad: Prophet for Our Time” is her second book on the biography of the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him). This was published by Harper Collins in 2006 as a part of the Eminent Lives series. She has charted out her book in an introduction and five chapters: Mecca, *jāhiliyyah*, *hijrah*, *jibād* and *salām*.

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### Sources of the Book

Armstrong does not consult primary Arabic sources for this book. She uses secondary sources and largely depends on translations.

- a. **Qur'ān:** For the translation of Qur'ānic verses, Michael Sells's and Muhammad Asad's translations have been used.
- b. **Aḥādīth:** The translations of *aḥādīth* have been picked up from other books. She quotes *aḥādīth* from Martin Ling's "Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earlier Sources" and from Mernissi's "Women and Islam" and from Leila Ahmed's "Women and Gender in Islam".
- c. **Biography of the Prophet:** For details of the biographical account of the Prophet, she quotes Ibn Ishāq from Guillaume's "The Life of Muhammad"; Ibn Sa'īd from Martin Ling's "Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earlier Sources" and from Tor Andrae's "Muhammad: The Man and His Faith"; Al-Wāqidi from Reza Aslan's "No god but God"; Al-Ṭabarī from Guillaume's "The Life of Muhammad" and from Muhammad A. Bamyeh's "Social Origins of Islam".
- d. **Arabic Poetry:** To quote Arabic poets, R. A. Nicholson's "A Literary History of the Arabs" has been utilized. Labīd ibn Rabī'ah's and Zubayr ibn Abī Salamah's "*Al-Mu'allaqāt*" have been quoted from Izutsu's "Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'ān".
- e. **Other Sources:** Other sources used for the book are Suyūṭī's "*Al-Ittiqān*" from Maxime Rodinson's "Muhammad" translated by Anne Carter; Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī from Mernissi's "Women and Islam"; Ibn al-Kalbī's "The Book of Idols" from Peters' "*Hajj*"; and Montgomery Watt's books on the Prophet's biography are also consulted by her.

### Introduction

After the September 11 attacks, the West adopted a very negative opinion about Muḥammad, the Prophet of Islam (peace be upon him), labelling him a terrorist. Their attitude gave fuel to fanatic extremists to start a hatred propaganda against the West. She came forward to pen down this book against the backdrop of these tensions between the West and Islam. She claims that the life of the Prophet Muḥammad is "crucial to the unfolding of Islamic ideals." She considers the attitude of the West unfair to accuse him of the crimes committed by some of his followers. She advises the Western world in the following words: "We can no longer afford to indulge this type of bigotry, because it is a gift to extremists who can use such statements to "prove" that the Western world is indeed engaged on a new crusade against the Islamic world. Muhammad was not a man of violence. We must approach his life in a balanced way, in order to appreciate his considerable achievements. To cultivate an inaccurate prejudice damages the tolerance, liberty and compassion that are supposed to characterize Western culture."<sup>iii</sup>

### Compilation and Arrangement of the Qur'ān

In the introduction, she suggests, according to her theological bent, that the Qur'ān was 'claimed' by Muhammad to be Divine in nature. Her succinct comment, "Muhammad claimed that he was the recipient of direct message from God" shows her subjectiveness which she tries to disguise a few lines ahead where she conforms to the Muslims' view that it is the Holy Word, and its authority remains absolute. The historical account of its compilation given by her has been somewhat overshadowed by 'ahistorical' component. She gives wrong information that "the first official compilation of the Qur'ān was made in about 650, twenty years after Muhammad's death." This is not true, of course, because all Qur'ānic verses were present in written form during the Prophet's time and the first official compilation was made by the first Caliph Abū Bakr (r.632-634) as mentioned by *Imām* Bukhārī in a *ḥadīth*.<sup>iv</sup> She has been referring to its copies which were copied down from the 'first official copy' and distributed by the third Caliph Uthmān (r. 644-655) to his provinces as narrated by *Imām* Bukhārī in his *Al-Saḥīḥ*.<sup>v</sup> About its arrangement, she remarks: "the Qur'ān was not designed to be read sequentially. In its final form, the chapters or *sūrah*s of the Qur'ān have been arranged arbitrarily, beginning with the longest and ending with the shortest, so the order is not important."<sup>vi</sup> In fact, its chapters have not been arranged "arbitrarily" as the author has suggested. These have been placed at definite positions told by Gabriel to the Prophet (peace be upon him).

This arrangement is called “*tanqīḥ*” (that is made by the Prophet, peace be upon him, under the Divined directions) in contrast to the “*nuzūl*” (that is in accordance with the chronological order of revelation). The method of arrangement has been told in a *ḥadīth* of *Al-Sunan* Al-Tirmidhī: “So when something was revealed, he would call for someone who could write, and say: ‘Put these ayahs in the *surah* which mention this and that in it.’”<sup>vii</sup>

### The Beginning of Revelation

The first chapter begins with a brief account of the incidence of first revelation. The Prophet (peace be upon him) received an angel in the cave and was given early verses of the Qur’ān. Armstrong’s account is misleading and distorted as she mentions that he assumed he was being possessed by a jinn: “In his terror, Muhammad could only think that he was being attacked by a *jinni*, one of the fiery spirits who haunted the Arabian steppes and frequently lured travellers from the right path..... So when Muhammad heard the curt command ‘Recite!’ he immediately assumed that he too had become possessed. ‘I am no poet,’ he pleaded.”<sup>viii</sup> As a matter of fact, *Imām* Bukhārī gives a description of the beginning of revelation in a *ḥadīth* narrated by ‘Ā’ishah. This *ḥadīth* contains the word: *ḥajā’ abu al-malaku* i.e. an angel came to him.<sup>ix</sup> At no place it is mentioned that he assumed he had seen a *jinni*. This is a self-made assumption by the author. Actually, his fear was a natural reaction to an unexpected occurrence, and although he shuddered, but never called it ‘one of the fiery spirits who haunted the Arabian steppes.’ The author seems convinced that he had seen a *jinni* because she has linked this vision of the Prophet of Islam with the vision of *jinn* by a poet. To imply this sense in her account of the incident, she has mistranslated the words of the *ḥadīth* “*mānā bi qarī’in*” as “I am no poet”, whereas the correct translation is “I do not know how to read.”

### View about the ‘Satanic Verses’

The author mentions the incidence of recitation of some verses of *Surah al-Najm* by the Prophet which were induced by Satan while the occurrence of this incidence has been denied by most Islamic scholars of *ḥadīth* as being unauthentic (*ḍa’if*). *Imām* Fakhar al-Dīn al-Razī states in the exegetical note of the verse 52 of *Surah al-Najm* that the scholars of research have declared the story as an outright fabrication and they argued against it with the Qur’ān, *Sunnah* and reason.<sup>x</sup> Contrarily, Armstrong has given the account in a way which suggests her approval of the incidence. She remarks: “The episode is recounted by only two of Muhammad’s early biographers; and some scholars believe it to be apocryphal, though it is hard to see why anybody would make it up.”<sup>xi</sup>

It is noteworthy that if ‘only two biographers’ have recounted the incident, then how can they override the opinion of most who call it an unauthentic episode and there remain ‘some of them who believe it to be apocryphal.’? The author moves ahead to claim unjustly that it was Muḥammad’s own desire working and he thrust his mistake on the shoulder of Satan.<sup>xii</sup> Being much inferior from the status of a Prophet, this act is absolutely wrong and an allegation on him (peace be upon him). To prove his argument, *Imām* al-Razī quotes that when Ibn Khuzaymah, a renowned *muḥaddith*, was asked about this incidence he replied: This has been fabricated by *al-Zanādiqah* (the heretics) and he wrote a book in its refutation. *Imām* al-Bayhaqī says, the narration of this incidence is unproven as its narrators have been reproached by *muḥaddithīn*. *Imām* Bukhārī and others have narrated the revelation of *Surah al-Najm* without the event of *al-Gharāniq*.<sup>xiii</sup>

### Influences of Judaism and Christianity on Islam

Karen Armstrong can be seen finding traces of the influence of Judaism and Christianity on Islam. Here, she is placing herself in line with those orientalist who claim that Islam is nothing but a modification of preexisting Semitic traditions. In her view, Arabs had some knowledge of the monotheistic religions of Judaism and Christianity. Their merchants had met Christian monks and hermits during their travels. They were familiar with the concepts of Paradise and the Last Judgment. Like them, they also wished they had sacred scripture in their own language. Allāh, they believed, was the same God worshipped by Jews and Christians. They used to circumcise their sons at the age of thirteen because Ishmael, son of Abraham, was circumcised at that age.<sup>xiv</sup> There were some people among Arabs, known as the *ḥanīfs*, who were not satisfied with the pagan practices and had turned away from them to seek the pure religion of their forefather, Abraham. Armstrong suggests that as Muḥammad had links with some of these *ḥanīfs*, he might have received the monotheistic viewpoint of Divinity from them.<sup>xv</sup>

### View about the Polygamy of Muḥammad

The Qur'ānic injunction of polygamy has always been targeted by some orientalists. William Muir, for instance, remarked that after the death of Khadījah, Muḥammad 'made the dangerous trial of polygamy' and 'fell as easy prey to his strong passion for the sex'.<sup>xvi</sup> Armstrong, however, defends this injunction as being an attempt to give the woman a legal status in the society and sees it as a 'social advance'. She remarks: "The Qur'ānic institution of polygamy was a piece of social legislation. It was designed not to gratify the male sexual appetite, but to correct the injustices done to widows, orphans, and other female dependants, who were especially vulnerable."<sup>xvii</sup> Many orientalists take pride in charging at him by citing impropriety, as they construe, of some of his marriages. Geisler, a Distinguished Professor of Apologetics at Veritas Evangelical Seminary, criticized him for having more than four wives while limiting his followers to four, so he violated the basic law he set for others.<sup>xviii</sup> Armstrong, however, views it differently. She thinks this was a common practice in Arab and his marriages were not meant for gratification of desire rather they had more practical ends.<sup>xix</sup> While discussing the marriage of the Prophet with Khadījah, she has refuted those critics who say that this was a 'marriage of convenience'. In fact, he loved her dearly and did not take another wife in her life.<sup>xx</sup> Although the author defends Prophet's other marriages, but this is not the case with his marriage with Zaynab. The description of this marriage has been marred by scandalous statement. She has been said to be close to Muḥammad and was interested in him. After her unsuccessful match with Zayd, she had a romantic encounter with him which eventually led to her divorce.<sup>xxi</sup> The author has stated this story, like any biased orientalist, at the cost of her attempts for reconciliation. The viewpoint that Muḥammad's encounter with unveiled Zaynab led to divorce is unfounded because she was his cousin and he had known her for many years. If he ever had any thought of her beautiful looks, he would have taken her in marriage himself at first rather than giving her in marriage to Zayd. <sup>xxii</sup> Furthermore, the marriage caused no gap between Muḥammad and Zayd and he remained loyal to him until his death.<sup>xxiii</sup>

### Approach toward Females

The author rightly points out that there were present 'strong female signs in the early revelations'. So, women were the first to respond to it. For example, the word *al-Raḥmān* and *al-Raḥīm* in the *basmallaḥ* are etymologically related to the word *al-Raḥm* (womb). There are also present allusions in the Qur'ān to "a woman conceiving a child or giving birth; the image of a woman who has lost her only child, and the poignant evocation of a baby girl, murdered by her disappointed parents."<sup>xxiv</sup> Regarding the *hijāb*, she opines that the Qur'ānic verses of *hijāb* meant particularly for the wives of Muḥammad and cannot be applied to all Muslim women. It was a compromise made by him due to a particular atmosphere of Medina where non-believers and hypocrites were raising fingers at the freedom enjoyed by his wives.<sup>xxv</sup> Moreover, the Qur'ānic injunction about beating wives has allegedly been linked up with the permission of domestic violence. Consequently, many orientalists misuse this verse to defame the peaceful disposition of the Prophet (peace be upon him). Karen Armstrong, not different from others, also raises this issue and misinterprets this verse bleakly. In her view, although Muḥammad (peace be upon him) used to treat his wives nicely, but when this verse was revealed, he disliked it because he did not want domestic beating of women. Vindictively, she remarks that his companions 'Umar and Abū Bakr used to beat their wives.<sup>xxvi</sup> Conversely, how the Prophet can dislike a verse revealed by God? How his Companions could beat their wives? Her words 'without giving the matter a second thought' indicate that they were quarrelsome and violent, which is an allegation on them because they used to follow his commandment mentioned in a *ḥadīth* of *Al-Saḥīḥ* of al-Bukhārī: "How does anyone of you beat his wife as he beats the stallion camel, and then he may embrace her?"<sup>xxvii</sup> And his own example was also before them as 'Ā'ishah narrates about him: "The Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) never beat any of his servants, or wives, and his hand never hit anything."<sup>xxviii</sup> Despite her sympathetic approach toward females, the author narrates those events in an inadequate way that led to the allegation on the Prophet's wife, 'Ā'ishah. During her account, she keeps on entering remarks that would remain offensive to the Believers. Ṣafwān with whom her relation was fabricated was her 'old friend'. Her husband doubted her; even her parents wouldn't believe her. And finally, the tragedy was averted but 'doubts remained'. The author's opinion about her character is offensive as she calls her proud, jealous, outspoken and egotist.<sup>xxix</sup> Her comments about 'Ā'ishah (may Allāh be pleased with her) are unjustified and mock her take on female issues.

## Journey to Ṭā'if

The third chapter begins with a description of the Prophet's journey to Ṭā'if. According to Muslim biographers, a group of *jinn* overheard his recitation of the Qur'ān while he was returning from this journey. On the contrary, the author distorts this fact altogether and supposes that these were not *jinn*, but Jews. She says: "The word *jinn* did not always refer to the whimsical sprites of Arabia; it could also be used for "strangers," people who had hitherto been unseen. The Qur'ān indicates that the travellers, who lurked out of sight in Nakhlah, listening to Muhammad's recitation, may have been Jews."<sup>xxx</sup> This is a deliberate distortion of the meaning of *jinn*. If the claim is accepted awhile, for the sake of argument, it still fails to convince that those unseen were Jews. Her words 'may have been Jews' indicate that even she is not sure about it. Here, she can be seen suggesting just another self-made interpretation of the word *jinn* going far away from truth.

## The Night Journey

The Night Journey of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and the subsequent Ascension to the Heaven, in Armstrong's view, was his vision referred to in the Qur'ān. After quoting the verses regarding it, she comments: "Later, Muslims began to piece together these fragmentary references to create a coherent narrative. Influenced perhaps by the stories told by Jewish mystics of their ascent through the seven heavens to the throne of God, they imagined their prophet making a similar spiritual flight."<sup>xxxii</sup> The word 'imagined' employed here to describe the narrative of this journey clearly indicates that the author does not consider this event factual. The supposition she makes is that the Companions who have narrated this event joined together different bits of it to carve a picture out of their imagination. For her, this is not only a narration of a marvellous deed but "a wonderful commentary on the deeper subtext of the external events" happening in the life of Muḥammad. Like a traditional Arabian poet, he had to go 'beyond his original expectations and transcend the received ideas of his time' and finally return to unite with his people.<sup>xxxiii</sup> All these statements reveal that the author is fraught with doubt and is considering this journey a wishful attempt by his followers to give a heroic picture of him and dismiss the grim rejection he had to face at the hands of the people of Ṭā'if.

## Monotheistic Pluralism

More importantly, she sees the Night Journey as a rejection of the degenerating pagan pluralism in favour of monotheistic pluralism. In Jerusalem, Muḥammad was welcomed by his 'brothers', the earlier Prophets, who appreciated each other's tradition and did not want to convert the other to his side.<sup>xxxiii</sup> This policy of monotheistic plurality provides the basis of her attempts at reconciliation. As the book was written with an aim to cut down tensions between Muslims and the West, there are certain references in the book which address Muslims to reconcile them with non-Muslims: The faithful must believe indiscriminately in the revelations of each of God's messengers. Similarly, they must consider the Qur'ān a 'confirmation of the previous scriptures', therefore, Muslims must also revere Moses and Jesus. As they all believe in the same God, no one group can claim its entitlement to God with the exclusion of others.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The idea behind these reconciliation attempts is to highlight the commonalities between Muslims, Christians and Jews, although differences are there. For instance, the faithful do believe in other scriptures that were sent down by Allāh, but the Qur'ān has clearly mentioned that those scriptures had been tampered by the misguided followers as it says: "But those who wronged changed (those words) to a statement other than that which had been said to them."<sup>xxxv</sup> It also says: "Then, because of their breaking their covenant We cursed them and made their heart hard: they pervert words from their meanings, and have forgotten a part of what they were minded."<sup>xxxvi</sup> Similarly, Muslims do revere Moses and Jesus, but they do not believe in the wrong beliefs and practices that were attached to their religions after them. Furthermore, she reminds that Muslims are like other members of the Abrahamic family, and "every community had its own specially revealed *din*, so they must not take part in these pointless squabbles". They must avoid religious intolerance which drove them out of their city and stop insisting that they alone had the monopoly of truth.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Nevertheless, a piece of her advice on religious tolerance and reminder of 'specially revealed *din*' of every community does not mean undermining the message of the last *din*. If the last *din* is also 'a revealed *din*', then its teachings must not be ignored by members of other *dins*. If they are trying to mend Islam, they are also warranting their monopoly in a defiant way. The question lies not about 'the monopoly of truth' but about the truth itself which cannot be divided into factions.

### View about *Jihād*

The Islamic concept of *jihād* and the *ghazwah* of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) have been the aim of criticism by orientalists. Most of them insist that his *ghazawah* were not made under some divine inspiration, but for monetary and military benefits. He decided to incline toward wars to strengthen his position in Medina, or raise financial status of the Emigrants, or exert his military and hence political supremacy over the Meccans. Tor Andrae states: “Shortly after the battle of Badr, the principle is formulated which for a season made the sword the principal missionary instrument of Islam.”<sup>xxxviii</sup> In a similar vein, Armstrong toes the line of her predecessors in this regard while somewhat compromising on her reconciliation efforts. Having managed to escape from the roughshod treatment of the Meccan masters, in her opinion, Muslims did know the way forward. They did not have a plan and were confused searching for guidance restlessly. They were feeling themselves detached from the centrality of Mecca and wanted the Meccans to make notice of them. Both the Emigrants and the Helpers were looking forward to him for their financial assistance and he had to manage for them. She remarks about the *ghazawah*: “Shortly after Muhammad had arrived in Medina, he had started to send bands of Emigrants on raiding expeditions. Their aim was not to shed blood, but to secure an income by capturing camels, merchandise, and prisoners, who could be held for ransom.”<sup>xxxix</sup> Calling the *ghazawah* of Muslims “raiding expeditions” is an idea borrowed from her predecessors. Earlier, Watt has commented about a *ghazwah*: “...Muhammad intended the *raiding party* to violate the sacred month....”<sup>xl</sup> Alas! These *ghazawah* have been implicitly given the connotation of plunder, despite that the author believes it was ‘a normal expedient in times of hardships’ and ‘plunder was not his primary objective’. The use of ‘raiding expeditions’ indicates that she is convinced that the early skirmishes between Muslims and pagans were not due to the cause of God; those were conducted to ransack caravans. Although Islam remained a peaceful religion in Mecca, after migration the Qur’ān permitted them a ‘just war’-a war which can only be done for self-defense, not for aggression, provided the religious places of all are preserved. Under God’s Commandment fight was allowed, but in her view, Muhammad at that time had no experience of warfare. She doubts his ability as a statesman which can be seen from her words: “Muhammad tried to give his *ghazu* ethical grounding but he had no experience of a long military campaign, and would learn that, once it has started, a cycle of violence achieves an independent momentum, and can spin tragically out of control”.<sup>xli</sup>

### Expedition to Nakhlah and the Battle of Badr

Like other orientalists, Karen Armstrong also gives disapproving remarks about these two incidences. In reality, the fight at Nakhlah was made by few Muslims in the forbidden month without the will of the Prophet (peace be upon him). But she has twisted the fact by saying that he had sent them to attack the caravan, and consequently, instead of waiting for the forbidden month to pass, they attacked the caravan. Before her, Watt has also criticized it: “The booty from Nakhlah gave a fillip to the policy of raiding Meccan caravans.”<sup>xlii</sup> Armstrong moves further and takes Nakhlah as an example of Muhammad’s character in the battlefield. She comments that at this incidence ‘Muhammad did not know how to respond’ and he had discovered that idealistic wars might also become distasteful in the end. She criticizes that he had no fixed plan and used to respond to situations as they appeared before him.<sup>xliii</sup> After Nakhlah, she proceeds to describe the events of the battle of Badr. In her opinion, this battle was undertaken on the decision of men and Muhammad was not there in a commanding position. Eventually, after this battle, Muslims were aware that the Quraysh would revenge the defeat so ‘they dedicated themselves to a long, gruelling *jihād*’.<sup>xliv</sup> She has enrobed the *jihād* of Muslims with the fear of an inevitable Qurayshan riposte.

### Fate of Qaynuqa’ and Qurayzah

Qaynuqa’, a wealthy Jewish tribe and an ally of Ibn Ubbay, was put under siege on insulting a Muslim woman, and eventually they were forced to surrender after two weeks. Armstrong sees the capitulation of Qaynuqa’ negatively and presents it as a moral dilemma of Muslims. She argues that they had fought *jihād* on the justification of being dislocated from their houses, and now they were also compelling another people to leave their homeland.<sup>xlv</sup> Qurayzah was another Jewish tribe who violated the peace pact and provided assistance to the Quraysh against Muslims in the Battle of Trench. When they were sieged for this treason, they accepted the arbitration of Sa’d ibn Mu’adh, and according to his decision, their seven hundred men were executed. Armstrong does not see any strong objection to this and says that this was not done on religious or racial grounds, but it was a punishment that used to be meted out to the traitors.

It is also evident that seventeen other Jewish tribes were present in the oasis of Medina and no one objected to this treatment. Nevertheless, she thinks that if this event is viewed in the present day context it would appear to us a violation of the basic principles of Islam.<sup>xlvi</sup>

### Reconciliation

Toward the end of the book, she sums up her lesson on reconciliation. She accepts that Muḥammad, the Prophet of Islam, (peace be upon him) was not a man of war. The biased Muslim jihadists focus themselves on his warring years only and the prejudiced Western writers also criticize him for it. However, when seen in totality, he was a man of peace.<sup>xlvii</sup> She mourns the apathy of the Muslim and the Western worlds who have failed poorly to learn lessons from the leaves of their history. Being an optimist, she still manages to make the way forward, and gives tolerance and appreciation as the hallmarks of her plan of peace and reconciliation. She closes her treatise with the advice: "The brief history of the twenty-first century shows that neither side has mastered these lessons. 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 Muḥammad: a complex man, who resists facile, ideologically-driven categorization, who sometimes did things that were difficult or impossible for us to accept, but who had profound genius and founded a religion and cultural tradition that was not based on the sword but whose name – "Islam" – signified peace and reconciliation."<sup>xlviii</sup>

### Conclusion

As no human endeavour is free of mistake, therefore, the presence of an unseemly thing in a treatise does not make it flawed; rather it proves that this is an outcome of human intervention, not a divine scripture. A *prima facie* reading of the text does not inform the reader of the erroneous connotations embedded in it. The style and tone of the author, his choice of words, and construction of sentences all give insight into his mind. Keeping these basics in mind, a critical study of Karen Armstrong's "Muhammad: Prophet for Our Time" shows that it has some merits and demerits. Among its merits include the element of objectivity that runs throughout the book. It was written against a particular backdrop which the author has managed to uphold till the end. Post 9/11 atmosphere needed a rethinking about the approach with which the life of the Prophet of Islam (peace be upon him) should be seen. She argues that the lack of trust between the Western and Muslim worlds is due to certain shortcomings present on both sides. In her view, in order to understand Islam and its character the West must first learn the biography of their Prophet with an unbiased view. On the other side, Muslims must also understand that they are commanded to believe indiscriminately in the revelations of every messenger of God including Moses and Jesus. As is evident, her policy behind these reconciliation attempts is to highlight the commonalities between Muslims, Christians and Jews. There are also certain drawbacks of the book. The author has relied on secondary sources in most part of the text. When any author toes the line of a translator and shrinks to consult the original text confusions are likely to happen. This has happened in the case of Armstrong also. Many incidents in the life of the Prophet (peace be upon him) have been narrated in a way which does not satisfy a Muslim reader rather they are offensive at times. Night Journey has been called a coherent narrative of the Companions of Muhammad. Instead of an angel, she says *jinn* had appeared to him in the cave at the time of first revelation. At Nakhlah, those who heard his recitation of the Qur'ān were not *jinn*s, but Jews. The Satanic verses were his own desire talking through his mouth. All such comments have dampened the attempts of reconciliation made by the author. Another major setback of the book is that some distinguished Muslim personalities have been pictured negatively, in particular 'Ā'ishah and 'Umar. The author depicts her as being jealous, proud, outspoken and egoist. 'Umer, in her view, was not a man of *hilm* and used to beat his wife sometimes. Despite being a woman and an advocate of feminism, as is evident in her highlighting the female elements in the Qur'ān and defending women against domestic violence, her criticism of 'Ā'ishah, another woman, is surprising. An author who goes to criticize the distinguished Companion of Muslims' Prophet how can her reconciliation attempt would bridge the West and Muslim worlds? The answer is up to the reader.

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