

NASACRE

Annual General Meeting Thursday 8th May

London

Key note Address by Karen Armstrong *The Great Transformation*.

Background: Karen Armstrong is a renowned British author of many works on [comparative religion](#). A former Catholic nun, she rose to prominence with her highly successful book called *History of God*. As author of many books on the Islam, Armstrong has, since 9/11, become much in demand on the US lecture platform. She argues that each of the great world religions have in common an emphasis upon the overriding importance of [compassion](#), as expressed by way of the [Golden Rule](#): *Do not do unto others as you would not have done unto you*. In 2008, Armstrong called for the drawing up of a Charter of Compassion, a global [interfaith](#) initiative which, she announced, already enjoyed the support of the likes of [Archbishop Desmond Tutu](#) and the [United Nations](#).

Some Recommended current books for RE teachers and students:

- *The Battle for God: Fundamentalism in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (2000) Karen Armstrong
- *Muhammad: A Prophet For Our Time* (2006) Karen Armstrong
- *Islam Under Siege* (2004) Akbar Ahmed
- *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (2003) Sir Jonathan Sacks

Key Points from Armstrong's Talk at NASACRE, London:

'The Axial Age' according to historians, says Armstrong, was an important revolution in world history because of its central influence on humanity and religion was at the centre of this.

The best use of religion today is in the education and personal development of young people who are part of a 'global community'. Religion is *not* the cause of terrorism but the fault line; the cause is due to political imbalances and bad governance!

Your responsibility, as teachers, is to educate the next generation because if you lose the young then we are all lost!

There are multiple forms of religion; religions are not static: Christianity, Judaism, Islam and all the other major faiths are rich and diverse; they evolve, adapt and grow.

Today, we hear about what is Islam is by so called religious pundits. But to really understand Islam, Christianity or any other religion we must go back to its origin.

Our modernity today has also been the most violent period in world history: we developed technology to kill on a massive scale. Religious people respond violently when they feel under attack (read, for example, *Islam Under Siege* by Akbar Ahmed [Polity press]).

We are an opinionated society with our own particular 'self-righteous' views about 'the Other' or the 'pleased with oneself attitude'.

All religions in their origin were not about 'belief' as we know the word today; 'belief' originally meant 'to love', 'to give your heart' and with time its meaning changed. Religion is not about dogma.

The key idea is to get rid of 'egotism' as 'we become most fully ourselves when we give ourselves away'. All the world religions encourage us to get beyond our biological selfhood: "EGO" or "I": 'why is this happening to me!'

Yoga in its origin (not the exercise but the spiritual awakening enlightenment experience) gets rid of egotism. The word 'Islam' is the surrender of the ego to the divine: when Muslims prostrate before God (*sajdah*) they are humbly lowering their greatest human asset: the mind, the intellect and their head to God. Jesus' philosophy was to treat others better than the self and not to retaliate. So No to ego; No to violence.

Unless you act to change yourself you cannot understand the divine.

The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) challenged the tribal ethos of his time which is called the *jahilia*. The word 'Islam' is derived from 'salaam' which means peace and the Prophet's sunnah (and way of life) is based on concern for the other. God, in the Quran, only talks of war for self-defense. Contrary to popular orientalist myth, Islam did *not* spread by the sword. Early Muslims had to fight wars to defend themselves because they nearly got exterminated within a tribal society within which this form of conflict was the norm.

Today, the media on the one extreme and some young Muslims with 'anger for justice' on the other hear about 'Jihad' and they mistranslate this very complex term as 'holy war' when, in fact, it means an internal struggle to overcome our individual weaknesses.

Every single religion stresses this sense of 'discipline of compassion'.

The Golden Rule is: do not do to others what you would not have done to you.

Confucius: his underlying teaching was 'look into your soul and see what causes you pain and do not do this to others.

Rabbi Hillel: when asked to summarize the entire Jewish holy scripture stood on one leg and said: ‘that which is hateful to you do not do to others; the rest is commentary’. The rabbis summoned people to **action** not just to *think* about it!

Rabbi Akiva: love of God and love of neighbour allows for the unity of the human race.

Conclusion: It is important for each of us to develop a concern for everybody not just your co-religionists and family (in a discussion with Dr Amineh Hoti, Sue Ward argued the same: SACRE members should think about how they can improve RE in Britain not just issues related to their own religion). Jesus, who was born into a Jewish family, said love your enemies, and LOVE is a legal term in Jewish law. In reconciliation, two kings, for example, had to love each other in a treaties – it meant moral support and building of trust.

Compassion for the other is not a frivolous meaningless term in this context. It implies the rigorous process to put yourself in the shoes of the other! This is the kind of religion we need to teach our younger generation today.

Strengthening Karen’s points, I would argue that it is through a) **informed** knowledge that includes **understanding** and **respect** for the other and b) compassion and **empathy** for the other that teachers and leaders can begin to build upon the new government buzz word “community cohesion”. As Karen says, one must be willing to let go of the ego to feel compassion for the other as one would for oneself. For it is only in such a ‘global community’ that we can bring up the next generation in a successful productive and positive multicultural Britain.

Karen: “We need to give our RE a creative outlook and teach our teachers and children to venerate all religions; not to look at them in an egotistical way. RE students should leave the class thinking that each session has been a compelling learning experience and secondly we’ve got to apply the rigors of scholarship to RE - these should be the aims of SACRE. This is not a choice; it is an absolute imperative of our time”.

Written by Dr Amineh Hoti

who is not be able to attend on the Friday 11th July but sends her apologies and best wishes to you all.