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Different Shades of Visibility/ Invisibility and the Power of the Gaze in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*

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ABSTRACT

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Abstract: Reading the critical literature written on Charlote Bronte shows the need to reconsider the existence of some missing links in that critical literature. Said differently, much earlier criticism paid more attention to the "personal" than to the “textual” aspects of the novel. With a view to reducing this gap between these two aspects of the novel: i.e. the personal and the non-personal, this paper tries to show that there are still more textual aspects of this text that deserve some critical attention; moreover, such aspects have not received due attention by earlier critics. Here we aim at focusing the attention on the role of the "gaze" in (a) creating different kinds of movements that contribute to the fashioning of the characters, and (b) in delineating Bronte's characters in different ways. We have attempted to bring to light the issues of visibility and invisibility in Bronte’s text with a view to providing a newer way of looking at Bronte’s text.

Different Shades of Visibility/ Invisibility (the Power of the Gaze) in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*

"Mind you don't." said Bessie; and when she had ascertained that I was really subsiding, she loosened her hold of me, then she and Miss Abbot stood with folded arms, looking darkly and doubtfully on my face, as incredulous of my sanity….

Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, (ch. 2, p.7)

Charlotte is almost always writing of her own experience.

Sheila Suyllivan's *Study the Brontes*, 32

Introduction

Few have looked into the different shades of "visibility" and "invisibility" as well as "the power of the gaze" in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. A brief look at some of the critical literature on *Jane Eyre* shows that there has been more focus on the "personal" than on the "textual" aspect of the novel. Moreover, "visibility," and "invisibility have rarely been the target of rigorous academic research. A number of earlier studies used "The Brontes" as a part of their titles, paying more attention to the extra textual connections than to the text per se Others have busied themselves with matters of "plot," "too much melodrama," and "coarseness of language."[2] In this study, I propose to focus on some textual aspects that have been less at the center of critical attention. However, this is not the only vantage point that characterizes this research work. Indeed, the very selection of these textual aspects may shed some new light on the possibilities of future critical reception of Bronte's text. To focus on the textual, this study has devised a small set of terms that make the heart of its reading of Bronte's *Jane* Eyre.

This study makes use of certain terms that draw the reader's attention to a new way of reading Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. The three key terms are "visibility," "invisibility," and "gaze." While "visibility" here stands for notions such as the "presence," "ability to see or to be seen, felt or noticed," "invisibility" stands just for the absence/lack of "visibility." By "the gaze" I mean how most of the characters in this text fashion

the world around them and how themselves are fashioned by different ways of looking at things (i.e. in both the literal and the metaphorical senses of the word "looking": A more brilliant example here is Brocklehurst's accusations against Jane at Lowood which will be elaborated on at a later stage in this study). Indeed, the term "gaze" as I use it here is meant to subsume all senses of gazing, glancing, looking at, seeing, sighting, and watching. Hence, all other verbs that may be associated with the concept of "seeing" or "vision" in general may be included here. This study will also attempt to show in various but related ways that the link between the three terms "visibility," "invisibility," and "gaze" is a link that connects many of the events, characters, and themes in *Jane Eyre* together. Bronte's text is rich in shades of "visibility/invisibility" and in the different roles of power associated with the term "gaze." We shall look at the different uses of these three stick yards as they fashion not only the characters in Bronte's text but even our attitudes towards these characters.

Motivation & Methodology

What has motivated the choice of this topic is the fact that a close reading of Bronte's text invites a closer look at the different roles "(in)visibility" and the "gaze" play in most parts of this long text. Most of these "roles" have not received the critical acclaim they really deserve. They indeed deserve to be looked at with a critical eye. The hope is also that such an attempt may "re-open" *Jane Eyre*'s treasure trove for fresh considerations.
This research project simply depends on a close reading of a few textually selected materials that collectively substantiate the view that *Jane Eyre* does present different shades of (in)visibility and different instances of the power of the gaze. Besides, the selectness aims at supporting the view that shades of (in)visibility as well as the gaze work like a spine cord that brings the whole text together.

(In)visibility and Movement
Bronte's text opens with a set of words that all attract the beholder's gaze: a "cold winter wind" and "clouds so sombre" (ch. 1, p.1). This brings to the reader's mind's eye two contrasting pictures. The first is that of an overwhelming whiteness that is usually attributed to snow in

winter. The second is that of the shade of darkness caused by the "somberness" of the clouds on that day. From the outset, the text takes the reader's eyes into a short trip of visibility (i.e. the whiteness of the snow) and invisibility (i.e. what the somber clouds represent). In the same introductory page, Jane tells us that she "possessed" herself "of a book that was "stored with pictures" (ch. 1, p.1). Though it sounds natural that a child in her age (for she was ten at the opening of the text) should be more interested in pictorial than in printed texts, these pictures had the power effect of some stories told to Jane by Bessie, one of the maid-servants in Gateshead (ch. 1, p.5). These pictures are but a part of a larger reservoir of images that are scattered throughout the text. However, it strikes one as a persistent authorial style that many of these images in *Jane Eyre* are, implicitly or explicitly, related to verbs of mobility or immobility; in both cases, these verbs, in their turn, can be related to visibility or invisibility. Above all, be it movement or vision, the "gaze" exerts some power or influence that makes it tangible:

> The words in these introductory pages connected themselves with the succeeding vignettes, and gave significance to the rock standing up alone in a sea of billow and spray: to the broken boat stranded on a desolate coast; to the ghastly moon glancing through bars of cloud at a wreck just sinking. (ch. 1, p.2)

A close look at the kind of images described here draws the reader's attention to some of the major types of connections the whole text tries to make. The immobile "rock" is in sharp contrast with the restless "sea"; the visibility of the "ghastly moon" is partially concealed by the "bars of clouds." What this amounts to is that there is a very strong relationship between (in)visibility and (im)mobility in different parts of *Jane Eyre*. In the first four chapters for instance, Jane frequently avoids being "visible' to the Reeds and intentionally escapes their gazes at her. For her, at Gateshead, "invisibility" is not only a safe "hiding place" but an externally imposed state of affairs which is a corollary to the intentionally long and continual process of exclusion and isolation she experiences there. In Chapter 5, Jane

becomes invisible in Gateshead simply because she moves to Lowood where she comes to know new faces and new experiences. In Chapter 7, Mr. Brocklehurst's religious discourse seems to emphasize a type of "female invisibility" to achieve religious "perfection." His mission, he says, is "to teach them [the girls] to clothe themselves with shamefacedness and sobriety, not with braided hair and costly apparel" (p. 61). The former is more associated with stillness and immobility and these are, no doubts, tactics of invisibility; and the latter (i.e. braided hair and costly apparel) are associated with visibility. "Braided hair" and "costly apparel" are, indubitably, things that are meant to draw the on-looker's gaze.

In Chapter 20, Rochester uses the word "transfix" to draw this connection between (in)visibility and (im)mobility: "…. yet I dare not show you where I am vulnerable, least, faithful and friendly as you are, you should transfix me at once" (p. 229). Here, Rochester's keenness to keep his weak points invisible to Jane is related to his desire not to be "transfixed" by her. Hence, the reciprocal relationship between (in)visibility and (im)mobility.

In Chapter 34, when Jane tries to escape from her cousin, St. John tells Jane, "God and nature intended you for a missionary's wife" (p. 431). Such a mission, so far unheard of, unhinted at, in a word, something invisible to Jane's eyes, does change the smooth relationship between Jane and her cousin. Jane, as she tells us in the next chapter, has "sisterly affection for him." Early in their relationship, Jane does not try to escape from him. St. John's interest in marrying her changes the pattern of that relationship: "And I *hastened* upstairs as I saw him entering the garden. But I was *forced* to meet him again at supper" (p. 446).The italicized words sum up much of the change of the cousins' relationship. This is one more example of the strong connection between (in)visibility and (im)mobility.

(In)visibility, the Gaze and the Construction of Character

Jane Eyre's power as a character in this text emerges, in the main, from her ability to make use of her gazes to build up her personality right from the outset of her journey into self-discovery. This may be clarified better if we compare her character to her cousin's (i.e. John Reed's) who is four years older than Jane Eyre (5). She describes him as "not quick either of vision or conception" (5). The first of these

attributes accounts for Jane's hiding behind "the curtains" in a "window seat" from him without taking extra precautions that he should find her (5). It is his sister Eliza who finds Jane's hiding place and not John himself. In line with this weak vision comes Jane's description of John's eye "bleared eye" (5) – that is John's eyes are not only red and watery but also he cannot see clearly. And because he "was not quick of … conception" Jane Eyre portrays his education as a "failure" rather than a "success" (pp. 5-6). He is more interested in property than in reading. In his "reprimand" of Jane Eyre's "encroaching" into his property he tells her "I'll teach you to rummage my book-shelves: for they are mine; all the house belongs to me, or will do so in a few years" (pp.6-7).

Jane's torture at the hands of her cousin is partly ascribed to the absence of the gaze of John's mother. Jane sums up this when she tells us:

> …. Mrs Reed was blind and deaf on the subject: she never saw him strike or heard him abuse me, though he did both now and then in her very presence; more frequently, however, behind her back. (p.6)

Said differently, John's character is partially drawn by the absence of his mother's gaze. Similarly, a part of the painful life Jane had to experience at this early age resulted from the absence of the passionate motherly gaze of her late mother as well as from the lack of Mrs Reed's gaze which has granted John Reed a sort of "green light" to do what he likes with Jane.

To the same effect but to a different purpose, John's order to Jane to "show the book" and his reproach to her that she has "no business to take our books" (p.6) may as well mean that he means to deny her the right to knowledge. Hence, the "gaze" (enacted in the process of reading) here functions as a threat to the status quo. For John, Jane's knowledge should not be permitted as this will put both of them on equal terms.

In Lowood, a great part of Jane's character will be based on the concepts of (in)visibility as well as on the power of the gaze. Talking about Miss Temple, Jane Eyre says that Miss Temple's "language" has: "something which chastened the pleasure of those who looked on her" (p. 69). Unlike most of Jane's visibilities, Miss Temple 's is a

positive visibility that pleases the beholder's eyes. One may say this is because Jane loves this teacher and she is, more likely blinded by her love and admiration for Miss Temple. However, there is a sense of pleasantness associated with the character of Miss Temple. Such claims might be truer in the case of Jane who once goes on to say: "The refreshing meals, the brilliant fire . . . they glowed in the bright tint of her cheek (p. 70). After the departure of Miss Temple Jane who now "lost" her "stead" mother and till this moment has never left Lowood is "dawned" by what she calls "another discovery" (p. 81):

> I had undergone a transforming process; that my mind had put off all it had borrowed of Miss Temple ... My world had for some years been in Lowood, my experience had been of its rules and systems; now I remember that the real world is wide… (p.81)

The invisibility of Miss Temple has posed an opportunity for Jane's mind's eye to transgress the visible (i.e. Lowood with all what it meant to Jane) to the invisible (or what she calls the "real world") which, at this very moment, at least, invisible to her as it lies beyond the walls of this institution. It is this unthought-of-invisible that fashions Jane's character in the coming chapters of the novel. It also determines her power of the gaze: That is the way she looks at and feels about the world around her. Jane's new romantic self becomes a corollary of her interest in exploring the invisible world that lies beyond the boundaries of Lowood. In chapter 10, Jane tells us that Miss Temple's departure of Lowood has changed her drastically: "From the day she left I was no longer the same." Put in a nutshell, Miss Temple's invisibility has changed Jane's character, or so she says. Expressed differently, Miss Temple's visibility has lead to the creation of a particular character that changes with the former's departure from Lowood. This accounts why Jane, after Miss Temple's departure from Lowood, starts thinking ambitiously of knowing what lies beyond the boundaries of Lowood school:

> I went to my window, opened it, and looked out. …. My eye passed all other objects to rest on those most remote, the blue peaks. It was those I longed to surmount …… (p.86)

It was the extreme limit of the gaze that determined Jane's longing. This is why her eye rest on the remote, not the near objects. Besides,

Jane's length of the gaze is made here a symbol of her ambitious, restless soul.

In another related, though different, incident, visibility plays an important role as a magnifying lens through which Jane was planned to be "seen" by other students and teachers at Lowood. After asking that Jane Eyre is placed on a stool in the middle of one of the rooms at Lowood, Mr. Broclkehurst asks the attendants there: "you see this girl?" (p.62). Putting her in such a place brings to the surface the question of the attendants' power of the gaze and Jane's visibility. He does not enquire here about Jane's "visibility" as such. Rather, he draws their attention to another kind of "visibility": "the Evil One had already found a servant and agent in her." This is because, in his view, she does not conform to the broader pattern of visibility of the institute where religion dominates all aspects of life. Jane is "an interloper and alien" (p.62). What Mr. Broclkehurst does is that he aimed at convincing all other attendants of the type of character he himself took Jane to be. In a word, he tries to "impose" on them how they should look at her. Along with such a "tailored" gaze goes the dichotomy of the "visible" body and the 'invisible" soul. On the basis of the overdominating Christian discourse at Lowood institute, the "visible" should experience "a punishment" (which is not named "discipline" as is the case with the sort of punishment Helen Burns goes through. In a nutshell, the protection of the invisible soul can only be granted through the punishment of the visible body. Playing on Jane's sameness and her difference to all other people in the institute, Mr. Brocklehurst plays upon the dichotomy of the visible/invisible. For him, both the visible and the invisible should conform to religious causes on the basis of which the Lowood institute "disciplines" its pupils. This is why at the visible level, "no single deformity points her out as a marked character"; however, her invisibility categorizes her as "not a member of the true flock" (p.63). Here, the visible takes the guise of the "seen/known" and the invisible takes the guise of the "heard of" and "the truly unknown." This latter came as a second hand knowledge of Jane Eyre "deceptive" and "lying" character as her aunt Mrs. Reed describes her.

The focus on the power of the gaze and the issue of visibility is further intensified in another incident in the text. As a means of punishment, Miss Scatchred:

> ... wrote in conspicuous characters on a piece of pasteboard the word "Slattern" and bound it like a phylactery round Helen's large, mild, intelligent, and benign-looking forehead" (p.70).

Visibility here aims at making this "a deserved punishment" for Helen, classifying her on the "wrong" side of the conforming folk at the institute. It is worth noting here how Jane reacts to the "visible" mark on Helen's forehead:

> I ran to Helen, tore it off, and thrust it into the fire. The fury of which she was incapable had been burning in my soul all day, and tears, hot and large, had continually been scalding my cheek . . . gave me an intolerable pain at the heart (p.70)

In this very incident "visibility" is used, to use the Lowood terminology, as a disciplinary technique that takes the individual while aiming at the collective. Jane's reaction is not all an exaggerated reaction. For her, this mark of visibility results in exactly what she herself suffered from her visibility at Gateshead: isolation and exclusion.

Commenting on Miss Scatchred's eyes Jane says: "and eyes like Miss Scatchred's eyes can only see the minute defects, and are blind to the full brightness of the orb"(Ch. 7, p.64). Here's a case of "dysfunctional visibility." [1] For any gazer's eyes, Helen Burn's "full brightness"– that is the brighter side of this sweet child -- Jane believes, should be more powerful to attract attention to than Helen's "minute defects".

Regretting the accusations raised against her by Mr Brocklehurst despite her attempts "to be so good and to do so much at Lowood," and after having "made visible progress" (p. 64) Jane discloses to readers two more important aspects of Victorian conditions for women's "visibility": "drawing " and "French"

Sympathizing with Jane's emotional injury and her broken heart, Helen Burns tell Jane that the latter might be the object of the teachers' and pupils' gaze. However, Helen assures her friend that when it comes to what Mr. Brocklehurst says the gazes on her will make her "visible" to the gazers only for a short time. Besides, what lurks behind the visible antagonism is a common "friendly feeling" that is not allowed to surface if one was to keep the kind of authoritative

power given to Mr. Brocklehurst (p. 65). Commenting on this very moment Jane says:

> There was I, then, mounted aloft; I, who had said I could not bear the shame of standing on my natural feet in the middle of the room, was now exposed to general view on a pedestal of infamy (p. 63)

Visibility here, is, as Jane describes, equated with "infamy." This "infamy" is further fostered by another incident that follows this immediately. While she has been the target of all the open eyes in that room, "a girl came up and passed" her "in passing". This girl, Jane tells us "lifted her eyes." Describing that very gaze Jane says:

> What a strange light inspired them {i.e. the girl's eyes}. What an extraordinary sensation that ray sent through me! How the new feeling bore me up! It was as if a martyr, a hero, had passed a slave or victim, and imparted strength in the transit (p. 63)

Despite her claim to have "mastered the rising hysteria," Jane's pain, to borrow her own words, "no language can describe." This girl's particular "gaze" seems to have surpassed all other gazes.

The most pivotal incident in Bronte's text where the title of this study is evidenced is what Jane experiences in the red-room introduced as early as Chapter Two of the text. This is more likely an indication of the significance of the relationship between the power of the gaze and the question of visibility; the visibility of petrifying scenes for such a young child like Jane. Of this experience, Jane tells us that she "never forgot the … frightful episode of the red-room." For it was in this room her aunt locked her in the dark and even Jane's "wild supplications for pardon" were not listened to (p. 67).

This new transformed self is also reflected in Jane's forgiveness of and sympathy with her aunt Sarah Reed when she visits her at a later time: "I looked I saw a woman attired like a well-dressed servant" (p.86). Bessie's impression by Jane's new "shape" at Lowood was not interpreted properly by Jane. As Bessie comes to know about Jane's attempt to find a job away from Lowood she goes to visit her at Lowood. Here is what Jane has to say: "I perceived that Bessie's glance, though it expressed regard, did in no shape denote admiration" (p. 86). Jane here is misreading Bessie's "gaze" who is now happily

surprised with the visible change in Jane's physiognomy. However, Bessie adds that Jane was "no beauty as a child" (p.86). This leaves the reader with a new criterion of visibility; beauty. Indeed, it is beauty that makes Georgina the most visible in the Reeds as different descriptions of her clarify. Having her own share of this new criterion, Jane becomes more visible to Bessie's eyes: "…. You look like a lady" (p.88)

Invisibility, sometimes, takes the guise of hatred. When Jane goes to see her dying aunt she is ignored by her cousins to the extent that she says: "Georgiana would chatter nonsense to her canary bird by the hour and take no notice of me" (p.228). Jane overcomes this invisibility by busying herself in drawing. "But I was determined not to seem at loss for occupation or amusement: I had brought my drawing materials with me and they served me for both" (p.228). Drawing, an activity that makes things visible, is a tactic Jane uses to fight back her invisibility in the eyes of the Reeds. This very act raises the Reeds' curiosity who wanted to know what Jane was drawing to which her answer comes: "I had a friend's face under my gaze" (p.229). Jane directs her artistic "gaze" to a person who is invisible to the Reeds. A gaze that succeeds in forcing the Reeds to "gaze" at the outcome of Jane's gaze and not to her personally. Yet, Jane becomes, momentarily though, "visible" again.

It is worth adding that the "most basic and encompassing marker of that identity" [i.e. Jane's] to borrow the words of Sharon Marcus, was Jane's "name" which was advertised "in all the papers" (toward the of *Jane Eyre* the novel). Here is another kind of "gaze" that gives an identity to Jane who becomes a relative of the Rivers family in the closing chapters of the text. Earlier, Jane advertises for the sake of getting a job away from the Lowood Institution. It is the gaze of Mrs Alice Fairfax that gives a new turn to Jane's character where she moves from an external observer of events in the novel to, not only a contributor, but an active creator of the actions of the events. In both advertisements, Jane's name was the target of two different gazers; St John in the former and Mrs. Alice Fairfax in the latter. Each of the two gazes refashioned Jane's character in its own way; in the former she's a wealthy woman and in the latter she is a silent lover.

(In)visibility/Gaze: Connections

Finally, in more than a half of Bronte's text, it is not hard to trace the numerous connections between the power of the gaze, (in)visibility and the different aspects of Bronte's text.
Thematically, Jane's outsidedness in the early chapters is a corollary of her assumed (in)visibility for the Reeds and for Mr. Brocklehurst; Jane's love story with Mr. Rochester is a natural outcome of her visibility in Mr. Rochester's life.
The gazes of Mrs. Fairfax and St. John Rivers give two different turns for the plot of the novel: in the first case Jane is an independent woman who has to be excluded from the privileges of upper class and in the second case she turns out to be a wealthy woman who changes the miserable life of the whole Rivers family.
Characterization is more often than not made with the help of the recurrences of visibilities/invisibilities. As the text puts it, in Mr. Rochester's early life, the insane wife remains invisible till Jane's visibility takes place in that household. Similarly, the three Rivers are kept invisible to Jane, invisiblity as an identity though, makes her way to their living place.

Conclusion

How the process of (in)visibility and the power of the gaze go into the construction of the characters in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* and how these contribute to the construction of the themes, plot and characterization in general are some of the aspects that have attracted any due critical acclaim. Paying more attention to textual analyses of this novel, this study attempts to shed more light on the role of the gaze/(in)visibility in (a) the types of movement scattered throughout the text, (b) the types of characters readers meet in the text, and (c) the types of connections that link the different aspects of Bronte's novel.

Footnotes

1. Examples of these include Tom Winnifrith's *The Brontes and their Background: Romance and Reality* (Macmillan,1973) and *The Brontes: the Critical Heritage* edited by Miriam Allott (Routledge & Keagan Paul, 1973)
2. See Chapter 6 in Miles's *Jane Eyre byCharlotte Bronte*.

3. We have coined this term, unknowing if it has been ever used before. By "dysfunctional visibility", we mean that sort of visibility in which the gazers do not really see what they are looking at. Rather, they impose on the gazed-at-object what they "feel" towards that object.

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Karen Armstrong:
Herald of Cultural Dialogue

by
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Abstract

This paper attempts to introduce Karen Armstrong to the Arab-Muslim world as a Western intellectual voice that re-evaluates Islamic heritage and calls for a fair appraisal of the Islamic civilization. Throughout her well-informed readings of the history of Islam, Prophet Mohammed (peace and blessings be upon him), and some decisive moments in the formative years of the Islamic civilization, Armstrong represents the Arab-Muslim world in a remarkably engaging style of intellectual balance and prejudice-free quest for truth. Alternative to the mainstream representations of the Islamic heritage and civilization, the discourse under the present discussion offers a radically different portrait of Islam as a mosaic of dynamically intertwined structures of profound meanings, and underlines unity in diversity and dialogue beyond difference. An exemplar of this discourse, Armstrong accentuates the need to transcend the constricting confines of the self in order to embrace 'the Other', and to initiate larger cultural spectrums of communication, exchange of ideas, and alliance of civilizations.

Introductory Glance

Born in Wildmoor, Worcestershire (14th November, 1944), Karen Armstrong is a British historian of religions and a former Catholic nun. A self-proclaimed "freelance monotheist," she believes in human unity as a structure of interfaith that transcends all constructed barriers and narrow ideologies. *Through the Narrow Gate* (1982), *The First Christian: Saint Paul's Impact on Christianity* (1983), *Beginning the World* (1983), *The Battle for God* (2000), *Faith After September 11* (2002), *Muhammad: A Prophet For Our Time* (2006), *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions* (2006), *The Bible: A Biography* (2007) are some of her contributions which exhibit her deep concern for arriving at a solid ground of understanding religious traditions and charting their essential interrelatedness[1]. Her search for such uniting elements among religious traditions is quite vivid in *A History of God: from Abraham to the Present* (1993). Under the banner of the "quest for God," Armstrong traces a deep network of similar attributes that characterize human pilgrimage on earth. That is to say, humanity at large has an underlying reverberating impulse that yearns for an overriding structure which informs and organizes human life. In almost every argument she raises, there is a strident accent on the common issues of religions despite surface differences. Such ideas have a far-reaching philosophy that is

1 In *The Spiral Staircase: A Memoir* (2004), Armstrong gives a remarkable account of her own spiritual quest and search for truth.

grounded in common human concerns, and seeks to break the walls and bridge the divides.

Focal Points

First of all, it is of significance to note that compassion is the platform for Armstrong's exploration of religious traditions. Defined as "an ability to see sacredness in every single human being, and a willingness to take practical care of the more vulnerable members of society," compassion, from her perspective, is the sine-qua-non of religious experience (*Battle* xiv). It is the central core element that stimulates humanity to collect its fragments and to connect them beyond all narrow sectarian imperatives. Compassion, in other words, celebrates the multitude of human experience and affirms its right to thrive in its manifold manifestations.[1] The absence of compassion, however, is at the root of the present atmosphere of antagonism. Armstrong sees in this absence the failure of humanity to realize the ultimate meanings of religious traditions and the triumph of "theologies of rage, resentment, and revenge" that "hijack" religion, promote hatred and conflict, and know no language but "murder" (ibid 366).

In *Islam: A Short History* (2000), Armstrong advances her foundational claim for "the disinterested love of truth and the respect for the sacred rights of others that characterize both Islam and Western society at their best" (191). The book covers the major incidents that occur with the advent of Islam, and provides a rich source of Islamic worldviews and their larger implications for the Muslim world. As a detailed history of the journey of this religion into the stage of the world and the different formative moments that contribute to its current state, the book also attempts to portray Islam in an image totally different from the Western long-held prejudices and biased misconceptions.*Islam* addresses various themes such as religious tolerance, rights of woman, religious interdependence, and war in Islam.

Armstrong scrutinizes Islamic principles and foregrounds their significance to understanding the modes of activity of the traditional

mindset. In an intensive engagement with cultural components, she reflects on these principles and delineates their relevance to the requirements of the contemporary world. Her representations of Islam are also rich with meanings that stand eloquent testimony to the fact that the Islamic vision is crucial for the health of any human collectivity.

Islam and the West is a major highlight for Armstrong. This issue captures the centrality of her discussions and takes on several dimensions. Guided by the intent to "build bridges and avert the possibility of future battles" (Armstrong, *Battle* 368), she exerts efforts to map areas of similarity and difference between Islam and the West. In terms of similarity, she draws on the residual history of the nexus of Islam and the West, and displays how this history is replete with examples of religious harmony and cooperation. On the contrary, the difference that mars the dominant history of the relationship of Islam and the West, as she makes it clear, arises out of narrow ideological fabrications in history. This difference is charged with the language of exclusion, hatred, and violence.[2]

To present a just image of Islam in lieu of the prevalent spirit of hostility underwrites Armstrong's major contributions. Guided by the principle of dialogue as a significant spring of cultural harmony and intercultural collaboration and world stability, she attempts to posit a different projection of Islam from a perspective that is free from stereotypes. In so doing, she aims at lessening the conflict-ridden culture of today and at promoting better understanding across cultures as a corner stone for a peaceful existence for all the citizens of the world. She notes:

> To cultivate a distorted image of Islam, to view it as inherently the enemy of democracy and decent values, and to revert to the bigoted
>
> views of the medieval Crusaders would be a catastrophe. Not only willsuch an approach antagonize the 1.2 billion Muslims with whom we share the world, but it will also violate the disinterested love of truthand respect for the sacred rights of others that characterize both Islam and Western society at their best. (*Islam* 191)

Her work aims to heal the wound-ridden history and to weigh more on the side of the all- embracing dialogue beyond conflicting differences and narrow ideological parameters.

Thematic Visions

In her attempt to arrive at a fair understanding of the Islamic civilization and achievements, Armstrong carries out in-depth acts of analysis of some of the foundational premises of Islam that are often misrepresented, or misinterpreted, by a number of Western intelligentsia. Prominent are questions like the relationship of Islam and the West, the interiority of the Islamic culture, the status of woman, and Muslim fundamentalism. The sections below present how Armstrong understands and tackles such elements of controversy.

A. **Islam and the West**

The numerous facets of the relationship between Islam and the West found a fertile ground for research in Armstrong. She examines the different phases of this relationship and expounds on the factors that amount to its manifold facets in history. Basically, this history has two faces: residual and dominant. Each face of this history impinges on the relation and takes it on a categorically different trajectory.

1. Residual History

The residual history is one of shared grounds of understanding and mutual respect. Armstrong shows how religious traditions like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam originate from the same roots of monotheism and share many fundamental principles that connect and compel them to develop more ties of intimacy: "Islam had been born in the religious pluralism of the Middle East, where the various faiths had coexisted for centuries" (*Muhammad* 22). She also explains how Islam is in continuity with its predecessors. “The Koran,” she writes, “does not condemn other religious traditions as false or incomplete but shows each new prophet as

confirming and continuing the insights of his predecessors" ("Unity" 177). She also foregrounds moments when these traditions join one another in acts of celebration and construction of the human civilization. Reflecting on how religious practices unite communities and deepen the compassionate atmosphere of their times, Armstrong notes: "Muhammad had been greatly excited by the prospect of working closely with the Jewish tribes, and had … introduced some practices (such as communal prayer on Friday afternoons, when Jews would be preparing for the Sabbath, and a fast on the Jewish Day of Atonement)" (*Islam* 17).

Such moments in history extend grounds of respect and admiration. Armstrong explains how the Muslim civilization had helped Europe to reconstitute itself after the "long trauma of the Dark Ages by reacquainting [the Europeans] with the philosophical, scientific, and mathematical heritage of ancient Greece" (Foreword xiii). She also shows how Muslim Spain was a centre of learning wherein "European scholars were sitting at the feet of Muslim scholars" to quench the European thirst of the knowledge that was compiled and constructed by Muslims (ibid). This formative period in the history of the Western civilization, according to Armstrong, displays how the residual history of the relationship of Islam and the West is pregnant with rare meanings and lofty instances of cooperation and constructive ties.

In addition to its past roots, the residual history has repercussions and rhythms in recent times. Armstrong remarks:

> At the beginning of the twentieth century, almost every single Muslim
> intellectual was in love with the West. They wanted their countries to
> looklike Britain and France, at that time the leaders of secular,
> democratic modernity. Some even went so far as to say that the
> Europeans were better Muslims than the Muslims themselves,
> because their modernized societies approached the egalitarian ideals
> of the Quran more closelythan anything that prevailed in traditional,
> Islamic countries. (Foreword xi)

Western modernity with its accent on the rights of individuals, democracy, freedom of expression, intellectual development, and cultural openness appeals to a galaxy of Muslim intelligentsia as principles that are profoundly congruent with the broad visions of Islam. Armstrong points out how such Muslim thinkers go in expressing their admiration for such Western ideals and aspiring to promote them in the Muslim world. Western modernity, as she notes, stimulates the Arab and Muslim minds to see resemblances and commonalities as a force to chart a fresh beginning with the West (ibid).

2. Dominant History

On account of the fact that "there was an anti-Muslim backlash in some Western countries" (*Muhammad* 13), Armstrong elucidates that this antagonism feeds into the relationship of Islam and the West. Marred with hatred and violence, this history results from an over-emphasis on differences as the exclusive criterion for defining the ramifications and prospects of the relation. That is to say, the exclusive emphasis on differences constructs barriers to understanding 'the Other', and blurs all visions that see possibilities of mutual respect at the heart of a sound, solid relationship. In such a modality of thought, each party perceives 'the Other' as totally different from, and a cause of fear to, the self. That is, 'the Other' is approached as a potential source of threat to the self and, therefore, prospects of conflict decide the nature and direction of this relationship.

In *Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet* (2008), Armstrong designates the roots of the conflict-ridden relationship as also stemming from ideologically-constructed misrepresentations. As she writes: "In the Middle Ages, Christians had been able to see Islam only as a failed version of Christianity, and had created myths to show that Muhammad had been instructed by a heretic" (34). Such misrepresentation of Islam as a "fanatical faith that encourages murder and terror" (12), of the Holy Koran as "the most boring book in the world" (38), and of Prophet

Mohammed as "the antithesis of the religious spirit and as the enemy of decent civilization" (44), as her argument runs, deepen the gap and promote animosity. Armstrong also notes that such ideologically motivated misrepresentations result in "the alienation of the Muslim world;" precisely owing to "its gradual discovery of the hostility and contempt for their Prophet and their religion" (38).

Furthermore, Armstrong contends that one cause of this difference results from later intellectual perspectives that speak radically divergent discourses. The later insistence on Western “logos” and Islamic “mythos” as cultural paradigms characteristic of each is a significant factor in dramatizing the conflict and drawing them largely apart[1]. Each epistemological paradigm operates in a different fashion of thought and guides its subjects to develop fixed ways of seeing reality that bear no relevance or pay no heed to the possibilities of other outlooks on life. This exclusiveness of perspectives, as a consequence, is tantamount to frustrating any bridge-building processes.

Besides, Armstrong touches on such European experiences as colonialism, Suez, and the Arab-Israeli conflict as “disasters” that “corrode into hatred” (“Now” 3). The oppression inflicted on the Muslim world and the atrocities of the experiences, in her reading, feed into more acts of attack and retaliation (ibid). That is, the Western exploitation of and hegemony over the Muslim world strangle any ray of hope in the life of such a relationship.

B. **Islamic Culture**

In her attempt to refute the claims made against the phenomenology of Islam, Armstrong makes the observation: "The very word *Islam*, which denotes the existential 'surrender' of the whole being

1 For further elaboration on logos-mythos dichotomy, see Karen Armstrong's *The Case for God*, pp. 348-9.

to God which Muslims are required to make, is related to *salam*, 'peace'" (*Muhammad* 14). She also reads into the biography of Prophet Mohammed (peace and blessings be upon him) as the harbinger of peace, whose mission is to "stop [all kinds] of discriminate slaughter" (ibid). And to reflect on the acts of terror that are committed by some Muslim fundamentalist groups, she writes: " It was particularly painful to me that the terrorists believed that they were following in the footsteps of the Prophet Muhammad" (ibid 13). Such terrorist activities, according to her, "hijack the biography of Muhammad and twist it to suit their own ends" (ibid 14). In response to such terrorist distortion of the meanings of Islam, Armstrong states:

> We can learn from Muhammad how to make peace. His whole career
> shows thatthe first priority must be to extirpate greed, hatred and contempt from our own hearts and to reform our own society. Only then is it possible to build a safe, stable world, where people can live together in harmony, and respect each other's differences. (ibid 15)

In addition, Armstrong characterizes the interiority of the Islamic culture as essentially conservative. Conservative cultures, as she explains, flourish in agrarian societies whose resources depend mainly on growing crops and harvesting lands. Two aspects are prominent in conservative cultures vis-à-vis promoting conformist mentalities (*Battle* 34).

First, communal welfare, as she continues to argue, takes precedence over individual gains. Owing to the limitations of their lives, individuals are in need to collaborate together and organize their efforts to fall into the collective benefit. Therefore, "social stability and order" are "more important than freedom of expression" (ibid). The conservative culture attaches more weight to the continuity and overall order of the community. That is, individual innovative acts or forms of experimentation that may collide with or cast aspersions over the

established order of mind enjoy little receptivity in such a conformist culture.

Secondly, Armstrong underlines the role of "myth and rituals" in keeping intact all social formations of the conservative culture. The mythological background of the conservative mode of existence, she observes, creates "a cast of mind that adapts and conforms to the way things are" (ibid 35). As crucial cultural components, myth and rituals unite members of the *ummah* 'community', strengthen their ties of solidarity, link individuals with the past, and confer the atmosphere of home upon the overall cultural outlook.

Unlike the prevalent stereotypes of conservative societies, Armstrong sees in the Islamic conservative culture the seeds of "dynamic" worldviews that cross the borders of the "static" and motivate its subjects to emerge as active participants in the construction of the various walks of life. "Throughout Muslim history," she writes, "there were movements of *islah* ("reform") and *tajdid* ("renewal"), which were often quite revolutionary" (ibid 40). She cites several thinkers and religious leaders who endeavour to "rinse the minds" of later "theological accretions" and hark back to "pristine Islam" (ibid 45). She mentions Ibn Taymiyyah (1263-1328), Ahmad ibn Idris (1780-1836), Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-92), et al. Armstrong discusses how this religion is not "static and fatalistic," but is open to accommodate changes and inspires "great cultural and political achievements" (ibid 59).

In addition to its conservative and dynamic cultural components, Armstrong regards the Islamic culture as a culture of celebration. Islam, according to her, is "a joyful message of hope" that radically transforms the culture of people into one of openness, activity, and achievement ("Unity" 165). Islam inspires individuals to cross all borders and move forward towards constructing a community of "brotherhood and social justice" (Armstrong, ibid 183). It also stimulates them to "redeem humanity from oppression and injustice" and to become harbingers of peace and noble morals (ibid 186). With all this, Muslims are motivated to celebrate life in its abundance as a manifestation of divine blessing and

a mark of their gratitude to God. The "Koran urges Muslims to see the world as an epiphany; they must make the imaginative effort to see *through* the fragmentary world to the full power of original being, to the transcendent reality that infuses all things" (ibid 167).

In Armstrong's account, unity is the "God of Islam" that expresses the wholeness and integrity of the communal and the personal (ibid 182). She describes how unity effectively operates at all levels in the Muslim collectivity. She explains how, for instance, *zakat* 'paying a certain amount of money to the needy', Ramadhan fast, and *hajj* 'pilgrimage' reflect not only a powerful experience of community but also the absence of such divides as classist and racist prejudices (*Battle* 37). Unity, as she displays, is the underlying dynamic that connects the various activities and unleashes an intense religious experience. The singularity of the Islamic meaning of unity, Armstrong affirms, is that it takes into consideration both the peculiarity of the individual experience and the collective interest as epitomes of the "Islamic spirituality" ("Unity" 182). This spirituality is, thus, a culmination of the complementary nature of Muslim acts both as an individual and a member of the larger *ummah* 'collectivity'.

C. **Ideals of Islam**

In her deliberate consideration of Islam, Armstrong pays considerable attention to the egalitarian ideals and morals this religion instills in the hearts and minds of its subjects. She sheds special light on areas that are often misinterpreted or lack in due attention. She attempts to re-present these ideals as they occur in the modality of the Islamic thought itself, and introduces them to the West which is in the dark of such realities of this religion.

Principal among Islamic ideals is the emphasis on justice. Armstrong notes that the "chief duty" of Muslims is "to create a just community in which all members, even the most weak and vulnerable" are "treated with absolute respect" (*Islam* xi). This stress on evolving a society free of oppression and tyranny commands top priority in "the religion of al-Allah" and motivates Muslims to participate in fulfilling

this ideal. Armstrong also displays how this virtue creates a "compassionate ethos" that fosters a healthy community crowned with "egalitarianism" ("Unity" 183). The Islamic accent on social justice leaves no place for classist, racist, or sexist biases to shake communal foundations, but rather implants a well-structured community that has "the hallmark of the more advanced religions" (ibid).

Furthermore, Armstrong foregrounds religious tolerance as part and parcel of "the religion of al-Allah." In addition to the fact that "there is to be 'no compulsion in religion'" (ibid 182), she writes that Islam comes in the monotheistic tradition and continues to promote its message. That is, Islam is a continuation of the revelation; precisely because, it acts as a "reminder" of the religious facets of truth that are familiar to one and all. This truth is of the "primordial faith" that is preached to all humanity by the "prophets of the past" (*Islam* 8). She remarks that the "Koran does not condemn other religious traditions as false or incomplete but shows each new prophet as confirming and continuing the insights of his predecessors" ("Unity" 177). This stress on the "continuity of the religious experience of mankind," as she continues to note, is further substantiated by the fact that "Muslims insist that ifMuhammad had known about Hindus and Buddhists, he would have included their religious sages: after his death they were allowed full religious liberty in the Islamic empire" (ibid). In this regard, Armstrong sees it crucial to accentuate the religious tolerance of Islam on the grounds that "tolerance is not a virtue that many Western people today would feel inclined to attribute to Islam" (ibid).

Besides, Armstrong observes that history has a special meaning in the context of Islam. The past is not merely a matter of sheer remembrance, nor is it something to be haphazardly visited on occasions: "A Muslim would meditate upon the current events of his time and upon past history as a Christian would contemplate an icon, using the creative imagination to discover the hidden divine kernel … one of the chief characteristics of Islam has been its sacralization of history" (*Islam* xii). This "sacralizationof history" is of a twofold advantage: glorifying the

divine and learning from history. Muslims reflect on the past to see the grandeur and wisdom of their Creator and, at the same time, to derive lessons for the present and the future. The past is replete with examples of individuals who invite divine reward or retribution owing to their deeds. The past provides Muslims with morals that can guide them to lead better lives. For Muslims, reflection on the past is an opportunity to engage with the behaviour of the time. Against this background Armstrong explains the interest Muslims have in history, and connects it to the essential elements requisite for the structure of any healthy community (ibid).

D. **War in Islam**

In contrast to the held stereotypes of Islam as a theology of violence and bloodshed, Armstrong advances a different discourse that hinges primarily on the justification and conduct of war in Islam:

> In the West, Muhammad has often been presented as a warlord, who
> forced Islam on a reluctant world by force of arms. The reality was quite different. Muhammad was fighting fir his life, was evolving a theology of the just war in the Koran with which most Christians would agree, and never forcedanybody to convert to his religion. Indeed the Koran is clear that there is to be 'no compulsion in religion'. In the Koran war is held to be abhorrent; the only just war is a war of self-defence. ("Unity" 182)

As stated, war is essentially abhorred in Islam; coercion is not an Islamic strategy to spread this religion. The justification of war in Islam, as Armstrong points out, is self-defence. Only on this ground war is permitted to safeguard the community and protect its boundaries against

external invasions. She characterizes such motive for waging wars as "just" and justified by other traditions, too.

Armstrong, moreover, highlights the moral conduct of the "just war" in Islam. She underlines the fact that in the self-defending war, Islam "strongly prohibits the killing of innocent civilians" (*Islam* 190). Non-combatants are not targets for the Muslim warriors. War is waged only against warriors who attack Muslims and cause their bloodshed. Armstrong also refers to the fact that "the Koran … says you must limit war and you must stop hostilities as soon as the enemy sues for peace" ("Journal" 12). This morally informed perspective on the conduct of war is what Islam essentially inculcates in the hearts and minds of its followers. To wage war under the banner of Islam necessitates implementing the ethics of war as indicated in the Koran and exemplified in the prophetic tradition.

E. **Rights of Woman in Islam**

In her critical exploration of the inwardness of the Islamic civilization, Armstrong designates the status of women in Islam as a project of "emancipation" (*Islam* 16). Not only does Islam liberate women from the shackles and ill-treatment of the pre-Islamic era, but it also accords them rights of "inheritance and divorce," and regards women as equals to men in terms of "duties and responsibilities" (ibid). This religion provides women with enough spaces to take part in all walks of life and to enjoy a high status as active social elements in the Muslim community (ibid).

Unlike the stereotypical representations of Islam as an "oppressive religion" that suppresses women and views them as objects in the hands of men, Armstrong states that the reality of this religion is totally different from such misrepresentations. The veiling of women or locking them in houses, as she states, is not essential to the Islamic parameters: "The Quran prescribes some degree of segregation and veiling for the Prophet's wives, but there is nothing in the Quran that requires the veiling of *all* women or their seclusion in a separate part of the house" (ibid). In addition, Armstrong grapples with polygamy in Islam and clarifies the

conditions of its justification. She shows how polygamy is first legitimated in Islam as a means to protect women who lost their husbands during wars. Though allowable, polygamy is framed by "absolute equality" among wives and showing "no sign of favouring one rather than the other" (ibid). Equality among wives is a prerequisite for polygamy and any act of violating this condition renders polygamy a sheer form of oppression. This restriction guarantees for the woman her dignity and right as a human being.

In depicting the patriarchal practices of some Muslims, Armstrong exposes such practices as customs that are developed four centuries after the Prophet's death. These customs, she continues to stress, result from the Muslims' imitation of the "Greek Christians of Byzantine" (ibid 16). Though foreign to pristine Islam, male repressive practices continue to culturally inform the succeeding generations and to affect the status of women as forms of outrage. Such ill-practices, Armstrong believes, misrepresent the true broad-mindedness of Islam, "hijack the faith and bring it into line with the prevailing patriarchy" (ibid).

F. **Muslim Fundamentalism**

In an interview administered by Steve Paulson (2009), Armstrong expresses her views about fundamentalism as a universal phenomenon. Fundamentalism, as she states, is not culture-specific, but is rather a set of ideologies that pervades the world in response to the unprecedented revolutionary culture of the scientific and secular modernity ("Going" 6). The "dismissive or even cruel" culture of secularism, as she elaborates, undermines the roots of religious structures and threatens its foundations. Such a menace amounts to an eruption of "all kinds of perverse and twisted forms" that adopt ideologies of hatred, exclusion, and violence against everything other than itself (ibid).

Islamic fundamentalism, in Armstrong's perspective, is an allotrope of the world fundamentalist movements. In *The Case for God* (2010), she writes:

The defensive piety popularly known as 'fundamentalism' erupted in

almostevery major faith during the twentieth century. In their desire to produce awholly rational, scientific faith that abolished *mythos* in favour of *logos*, Christian fundamentalists have interpreted scripture with a literalism that is unparalleled in the history of religion. In the United States, Protestant fundamentalists have evolved an ideology known as 'creation science', which regards the *mythoi* of the Bible as scientifically accurate. They have,therefore, campaigned against the teaching of evolution in the public schools,because it contradicts the creation story in the first chapter of Genesis. (7)

As a result of the "profound assault" of secularism that repudiates religious traditions and marginalizes its voice in the construction of the world, Muslim extremism, as she argues, erupts and develops counter-ideologies that are designed to safeguard the boundaries of religion ("Journal" 13). Furthermore, the Muslim worlddoes not take enough time to culturally translate this transformation into forms intelligible to them. The rapid and radical change that secularism espouses does not sink in or gradually trickle down in the minds of Muslims. The Muslim world is forced to fast assimilate a new culture that is drastically revolutionary to the established worldviews. Elaborating on this point, she refers to Ataturk's attempt to modernize Turkey by closing down the "Madrassas" and forcing people to "wear western clothes" (ibid). In Iran, the Shahs "used to make their soldiers go out with their bayonets, taking off the women's veils in the streets, and ripping them to pieces in front of them"(ibid). Egypt, as Armstrong points out, is yet another instance of how religion is repressed in the wake of secular modernity. She also shows how the most virulent forms of Sunni fundamentalism develop in the concentration camps and to which "President Nasser had enterred thousands of members of the Muslim Brotherhood without trial" (ibid). It is the "lethal assault" of secularism, in Armstrong's views, that causes the emergence of such unhealthy forms of thought.

Considering in view the 9/11 attacks as ramifications of the theologies of fundamentalism, Armstrong sees such terrorist acts as the

most "flagrant and wicked abuse of religion" (*Islam* 190). As an "embattled faith," fundamentalismdistorts the image of religion, sows the seeds of destruction, promotes antagonism and conflict, and annihilates humanity (*Battle* 368). That is to say, the fundamentalist attacks invite the interrogation of the very Islamic principles, cause split within the Muslim community, and further cultural destabilizations:

> Today many Muslims and Westerners regard one another with deep distrust. After the atrocities of September 11, many in the West have come to believe that, as Samuel P. Huntington had predicted, there is indeed a clash of civilizations because their religion renders Muslims unfit for modernity. Many are convinced that "Islam" somehow compels Muslims to commit acts of terror and violence, that it applauds suicide bombers, and that it is inherently incompatible with liberal, Western democracy. (Armstrong, Foreword xii)

However, Armstrong proposes a different perspective on the solution to extremism. Instead of the suppressive strategies, which are usually adopted in confronting fundamentalist thought, she underlines the need to "learn to see, perhaps, the pain that lies at the root of a lot of this [thought] because [fundamentalists] feel attacked by us" ("Journal" 12). She sees the intellectual task to "learn to decode fundamentalist rhetoric ... see the hidden agendas" as crucial to internalizing the life-force of this thought and initiating dialogue (ibid). This proposal moves beyond the current language of intimidation that breeds further violence and instability. Armstrong's point of departure is critical; it commences with a self-reflexive act and moves to embrace 'the Other' beyond all prefabricated boundaries. It is a vision of dialogue beyond difference.

Analytic Strategies

Underlying Armstrong's delineation of the relationship between Islam and the West is a profound vision that locates tension in the over-accent on difference and its associated ramifications of fear and violence. The difference that pervades the atmosphere of this relation—be it religion, ideology, outlook, etc. —projects the unknown 'Other' as a threat to the self (Armstrong, "Now" 1). This threat caused by the presence of some alien 'Other' necessitates self-preservation and promotes hatred, exclusion, and violence towards everything of, by, and, for 'the Other'. Violence breeds violence, and atrocities lead to attacks and counter-attacks (ibid). Armstrong sees this narrowly sectarian discourse and the absence of genuine dialogue as the source of conflict that escalates with the passage of time. She says:

> The sages [of the Axial Age as the source of the spiritual development of humanity] said the root cause of suffering lay in our
> desperate concern with self, which often needs to destroy others in order to preserve itself. And so they insisted that if we stepped outside the ego, then we would encounter what we call Brahman or
> God, nirvana or the Tao. ("Going" 2)

Armstrong's representation of Islam is informed by its foundational texts. She offers a serious engagement with the Koran and the Prophet's tradition and weaves the threads of her argument with verses and citations that capture the essence of this religion. She also displays the spirit of a disinterested scholar whose mission is a quest for truth. In citing Koranic texts, for instance, Armstrong does not decontextualize verses, nor does she impose a prefabricated reading on them. Rather, her references are profoundly contextualized and bear the essential meanings of the cited verses. In so doing, Armstrong infers what is truly essential to Islam and confidently proceeds with her work to understand and appreciate this religion unaffected by other antagonistic

voices. In her own way, she attempts to counteract the held stereotypes of Islam and urges the need to develop a broad-minded perspective of Islam that is based on understanding its true culture.

To lend concreteness to her arguments, Armstrong invariably draws lines of similarity or demarcation between Islam and Christianity. She takes every occasion to locate attributes of similarity-- "Koran is as central to the spirituality of Islam as Jesus, the Logos, is to Christianity" ("Unity" 164), "Islam ... as happened in Christianity" (*Islam* 16), "Unfortunately, as in Christianity, the religion [Islam] was later hijacked by the men" ("Unity" 184), "Politics is not extrinsic to a Muslim's personal religious life, as in Christianity which mistrusts mundane success" ("Unity" 186), or dissimilarity-- "there are more passages in the Bible than the Quran that are dedicated to violence" ("Going" 5), "If Christians find the Muslims' regard for politics strange, they should reflect that their passion for abstruse theological debate seems equally bizarre to Jews and Muslims" "Unity" 186), etc. Such concrete examples strengthen Armstrong's discourse and facilitate comprehension.

Concluding Note

Armstrong has a far-reaching philosophy that transcends narrow sectarian imperatives and crystallizes a unity of humanity in all multitude. It is a vision that dismantles barriers and knows no borders to the larger empire of the human. It is a "unanimous vision" of the "alliance of civilizations" that connects human fragments, orchestrates its rhythms into symphonies of shared meanings and common grounds of understanding and mutual respect, and uplifts one and all to a stage of realizing the urge to "join hands together to stop the kind of cruelty, violence and obscenity, moral obscenity that we saw on September the 11th" (Armstrong, "Now" 5).[3] Armstrong's ardent faith in compassion is the first step in the process for such a vision in order to see the broad light of the day. To see "sacredness" in every single human being is to perceive the profound meaning of human life, to appreciate the other

point of view, to consider difference as an occasion for celebration, and to transcend the self in order to embrace 'the Other'.

Armstrong's reading of Islam is a crucial step for accomplishing such a vision. In the face of the countless acts of misreading this religion, disorientating public attitudes and perceptions, and deepening wounds, she articulates an alternative voice that recognizes Islam as a culture profoundly interested in establishing a just human civilization. She displays how this religion is a life-affirming celebration of humanity. She also brings out elements of the residual history of the relationship of Islam and the West that stand eloquent testimony to the Islamic deep concern for a wider web of interconnected issues of harmony and collaboration. Armstrong exhibits aspects of Islamic history that are often repressed. Her pronouncements seek to counteract the prevalent atmosphere of hatred against this religion. She also sponsors a call to Western intellectuals to revise their readings of; and attitudes towards; Islamic worldviews, and to develop a fair appraisal instead.

> If Muslims need to understand our Western traditions and institutions more thoroughly today, we in the West need to divest ourselves of some of our old prejudices. Perhaps one place to start is with the figure of Muhammad:a complex, passionate man who sometimes did things that it is difficult for us to accept, but who had genius of a profound order and founded a religion and a cultural tradition that was not based on the sword— despite the Western myth — and whose name 'Islam' signifies peace and reconciliation. (Armstrong, *Muhammad* 266)

In its ultimate analysis, it is clear that Armstrong advances a reevaluation of Islam as a religion, culture, and civilization. In this act of representation, she provides perspectives that are designed to circulate a better understanding of the Muslim world. Her acts of reflection are premised on the need to understand 'the Other' in its own right and to give

credit where it is due. This intellectual platform contributes significantly to promoting dialogue across cultures by virtue of celebrating difference, establishing channels of communication, crossing borders, and embracing 'the Other'. This sums up the mission of Karen Armstrong, the herald of cultural dialogue.

Notes

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[1] Awarded the TED prize of $100,000 cash, Armstrong makes her wish: "I wish that you would help with the creation, launch and propagation of a Charter for Compassion – crafted by a group of inspirational thinkers from the three Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and based on the fundamental principle of the Golden Rule." 10thOctober, 2009. < http://www.ted.com/talks/karen_armstrong_makes_her_ted_prize_wish_the_charter_for_compassion.html>.

The Golden Rule: "Do not do to others what you would not like them to do to you" (qtd. in Moyers, "Journal" 1).

[2] For more reading on this difference and cultural antagonism, see

Beckett, Katharine Scarfe. *Anglo-Saxon Perceptions of the Islamic World.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003.

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[3] For more on UN Alliance of Civilizations, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7nrMegl6yRg>.

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