



## A Mission in Time

*Islam — A Short History*

Karen Armstrong

Chronicles Books

For numbers of people the words 'Islam' and 'Muslim' are associated with a brand of religion that promotes acts of terrorism, oppresses women, and stirs up civil war.

In this little book Karen Armstrong takes on the Herculean task of writing a history of Islam in 187 pages and correcting some of the distorted images of that religion which have grown up in the West.

In 610 CE an Arab businessman, Muhammad ibn Abdallah, received a revelation in a cave near Mecca. From that time on till the present day Islam has had a mission. Their sacred scripture, the Quran (Koran), told them that God is active in history and that they are "to create a just community in which the weak as well as the strong are to be treated with respect." Armstrong guides the reader through a series of complex events - assassinations, civil wars, invasions, the rise and fall of dynasties - which, along with the interior religious quest, constitute Islam's vision for the world. That vision is political as well as religious. While Christians are more concerned with beliefs and doctrines Muslims see politics as the arena in which God works.

The book includes a brief and lucid section on fundamentalism. Fundamentalism exists in other religions and not just Islam, it is highly critical of Western secularism which it sees as the enemy, trying to "wipe religion out". Fundamentalists feel they are fighting for survival and some resort to terror. Armstrong shows that Islam is not a violent militaristic faith as commonly assumed in the West. Some Muslims, in their fight against what they see as the evils of secularism, go to extremes and abandon those core values of peace and compassion which are at the heart of all the major world faiths.

Armstrong refers to the veiling of women, (the burkah). Many Westerners regard this custom as a form of male domination (as it was under the Taliban). Veiling links the wearer with the past and is a mild protest against our Western compulsion to "bare all", to idolize youth and to sideline age. The uniformity of dress also stresses the importance of community over Western individualism.

Armstrong shows Islam at its most triumphant between 1500 - 1700 CE. Three large empires were established and by the end of the 15th century Islamdom was the greatest power bloc in the world. "The whole world seemed to be becoming Islamic". But the arrival and rise of the West from 1750 onwards, founded on technology and capital investment and organized on secular, democratic lines, was a major turning point, not only for Islam but for all the major world religions. None of them, including Christianity, will ever be the same.

Armstrong contends that "it has never been more important for Western people to acquire a just appreciation and understanding of Islam". Today many Western people are expressing concern about the absence of spirituality in their lives, a diet of dry secularism is not enough. Muslims share this concern yet they welcome the more positive aspects of modernity without it being imposed upon them. They are anxious to retain their own religious traditions and some show some willingness to debate and reform them.

Armstrong's book is a necessary tool for getting a fair and balanced handle on Islam, a distorted image would be disastrous. Westerners share this world with 1.2 billion Muslims, at their best both societies have a common concern to promote justice, mercy and peace amongst all peoples.

Highly recommended.

*Alan Goss, Napier*