

# DETHRONE THE IMPOSTER!

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs  
Preached on the Third Sunday of Lent, March 8, 2015

*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

## **This Is No. 4 in a Sermon Series on Modern Mystics & Spiritual Leaders**

By modern, I refer to religious masters of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries, who are perhaps still living or who may have achieved their eminence at least within the last several hundred years.

The person highlighted herein is highly respected for her manifold contributions to our faith and to world understanding of religions, particularly the Judaic-Christian-Islamic traditions.

Karen Armstrong was Oxford-educated in literature, but she entered a convent at a very tender age, while still in her teens. Life in that tightly restricted environment was not kind to Karen, who also suffered from epilepsy.

The convent was actually abusive to her, both physically and verbally. It used cilices, a medieval way of mortifying the flesh. Their understanding of epilepsy was not medical but rather it had something to do with the Devil. It was a

profoundly negative, abusive experience for Karen.

She finally left the convent and then began a study of world religions in a rather happenstance way, which led to her fame as a renowned writer in the field of religion, propelled onto the world stage sort of against her will.

While researching Armstrong's background, I came across a TED talk (essentially a conversation between a leader and respondents) from 2008. Listening to it, I confess that my ego got in the way when I realized I couldn't improve on it. So instead I edited the text for length and paraphrased it in places. Let me deliver that talk to you now.

This presentation is roughly half the length of Karen's. I left out some biographical and other material, but I was moved by the whole of it. What she has to say is exceedingly important. So what follows is a sustained quote with sparing interruptions by me, indicated within the text by italic type. –AMS

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## **KAREN ARMSTRONG**

When I look back on my life, the last thing I ever wanted to do in any way involved religion. After I left my convent, I'd finished with religion. Frankly, I thought that was it,

and for thirteen years I kept clear of it. I wanted to be an English literature professor.

### **Oh, We Take Anybody**

But then I suffered a series of severe career catastrophes, one after the other, and finally

found myself in television. I said that to Bill Moyers, and he said, “Oh, we take anybody.”

And for one program in particular, I was sent to Jerusalem to make a film about early Christianity. And there for the first time, I encountered together the other religious traditions, Judaism and Islam, the sister religions of Christianity.

### **While I Found I Knew Nothing . . .**

. . . about the sister religions of Christianity, despite my intensely religious background, I’d seen Judaism as sort of just a prelude to Christianity, and I knew nothing of Islam at all. But in that city, that tortured city, where you see the three faiths jostling so uneasily together, you also become aware of the profound connection between them.

It has been the study of the other religious traditions that brought me back to a sense of what religion can be.

*AMS: That’s the theme of [Armstrong’s] talk, what religion can be. And that’s why I wanted to repeat it. Actually it enabled me to look at my own faith in a different light.*

### **Religious Belief Is a Recent Enthusiasm**

I found some astonishing things in the course of my study that never occurred to me. For example, I began to realize that the notion of belief, which we make such a fuss about today, is only a very recent religious enthusiasm, and it surfaced only in the West in about the 17<sup>th</sup> Century.

The word “belief” itself originally meant “to love, to prize, to hold dear,” and then in the

17<sup>th</sup> Century, the word narrowed its focus to mean “an intellectual assent to a set of propositions.” “Credo,” Greek for “I believe,” did not mean “I accept certain articles of faith.” It meant “I commit myself, I engage myself.” Indeed, some of the world’s religions think very little of religious orthodoxy.

*AMS: This might really surprise you. It certainly did me. Get a load of this one: In the Koran, of all places, religious opinion, religious orthodoxy is dismissed as zanna, and then here’s the definition she provides for it:*

### **Zanna Is Self-Indulgent Guesswork . . .**

. . . about matters that nobody can be certain of one way or the other but which makes people quarrelsome and stupidly sectarian. And so if religion is not about believing things, what is it about?

What I found across-the-board is that religion is about behaving differently. Instead of deciding whether or not you believe in God, first you do something. You behave in a committed way, and then you begin to understand the truths of religion.

Religious doctrines are meant to be summonses to action. You only understand them when you put them into practice, and the core of the practice is compassion.

### **Compassion Is the Test of Religiosity**

It is an arresting fact that right across-the-board in every single one of the world’s religions, compassion – the ability to feel with the other – is not only the test of any true religiosity, it is also what will bring us into

the presence of what Jews, Christians, Muslims call God, the Divine.

It is compassion, says the Buddha, which brings you to Nirvana. Why? Because in compassion, when we feel with and for the other, we dethrone ourselves from the center of our little world, and once we dethrone that ego, then we're ready to see the Divine.

### **The Golden Rule: Crucial to Monotheism**

In particular, every single one of the major world traditions has put at the core of its tradition what has become known as the golden rule, first propounded by Confucius five centuries before Christ. Do not do to others what you would not like them to do to you.

That, he said, was the central thread running through all of his teaching, and his disciples should put it into practice all day, every day. He taught that that rule would bring them then to the transcendent, which he called ren, human-heartedness, a transcendent experience in and of itself.

And this is absolutely crucial to the monotheisms.

### **Reciting the Whole of Torah on One Leg**

There's a famous story about the great rabbi Hillel. Hillel was an elder but a contemporary of Jesus, one of the rabbis at that time. And the story goes that a pagan came to him and offered to convert to Judaism if the rabbi could recite the whole of the Jewish teaching while he stood on one leg.

Hillel stood on one leg and said, "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the Torah, the rest is

commentary. Go and study it." And put his leg down. And he meant it. Go and study it.

### **Torah: Commentary on the Golden Rule**

He said, and I quote, "In your exegesis [a technical term for interpreting what scripture means], you must make it clear that every single verse of the Torah is merely a commentary upon the golden rule.

That's a new thought for me. The great rabbi Meir said that "Any interpretation of scripture which led to hatred, disdain, or contempt of other people, *any* other people, was illegitimate."

Saint Augustine made the exact same point. Scripture, he said, "Teaches nothing but charity, and we must not leave an interpretation of scripture until we have found a compassionate interpretation of it."

This struggle to find compassion in some of these rather barbaric texts is a good dress rehearsal for doing the same thing in ordinary life.

### **Religion Has Been Hijacked**

But now look at our world. We are living in a world where religion has been hijacked. Where terrorists cite Koranic verses to justify their bombing. Where, instead of taking Jesus' words, "Love your enemy, don't judge others," we have a spectacle of Christians endlessly judging others. Endlessly they have used scripture as a way of arguing with people, putting other people down. Throughout the ages, religion has been used to oppress others.

## **The Human Ego, that Clever Imposter, Has not yet Been Dethroned**

But the traditions have also insisted – and this is extremely important – that you must not confine your compassion to your own group. You must not confine compassion at all. Not to your own nation, your own co-religionists, your own tribe. You must have what one of the Chinese sages called “jian ai,” concern for everybody. Love your enemies. Honor the stranger.

This universal outreach is suppressed in the strident use of religion, abusive religion.

I’ve lost count of the number of taxi drivers who, when I say to them what I do for a living, inform me that religion has been the cause of all the major world wars in history.

Wrong! The causes of our present woes are political. But make no mistake about it. Religion is a kind of fault line. And when a conflict gets ingrained in a region, religion gets sucked in and becomes part of the problem.

### **Religion Afflicted with Our Violent Ethos**

Our modernity has been exceedingly violent. Between 1914 and 1945, 70 million people died in Europe alone because of armed conflict.

And so many of our institutions – even soccer, an otherwise pleasant pastime – now cause riots where people even die. It’s not surprising that religion too has been afflicted by this violent ethos.

But people seem to think or even equate religious faith with believing things. We even

call religious people believers, as though that were the main thing they do.

And very often secondary goals supplant primary things like compassion and the golden rule because the golden rule is difficult to follow. Sometimes when I’m speaking to congregations about compassion, I see a mutinous expression crossing some of their faces because a lot of religious people prefer to be right rather than compassionate.

*AMS: I know what Karen is talking about. I’ve seen that expression before.*

But since September 11, when my work on Islam suddenly propelled me into public life, I’ve been able to go all over the world and to find everywhere a yearning for change.

### **What Can We Do to Change Things?**

I’ve just come back from Pakistan, where literally thousands of people came to my lectures because they were yearning, first of all, to hear a friendly Western voice. And especially the young people were asking, “What can we do to change things?”

My hosts in Pakistan said, “Look, don’t be too polite with us. Tell us where we’re going wrong. Let us talk together about where religion is failing.” It seems to me that any ideology that doesn’t promote a sense of global understanding, a global appreciation of each other, is failing the test of our times.

### **Religion Should Be a Force for Harmony**

People want to be religious, and religion should be made a force for harmony in the world, which it can be and should be because of the golden rule: Do not do to oth-

ers what you would not have them do to you – an ethos that now should be applied globally. We should not treat other nations as we would not want to be treated ourselves.

It is a religious matter, a spiritual matter, and a moral matter that engages us all. It's time that we move beyond mere toleration to an appreciation of the other.

### **A Ten-Year War Reveals Spirituality**

*AMS: Then Karen concludes with a story from The Iliad that tells what spirituality can be. I'll recap the story for you if you don't remember it.*

*There is a ten-year war between Greece and Troy, and in one incident (the incident in the movie "Troy" with Brad Pitt), Achilles, the famous warrior of Greece, takes his troops out of the war, and the whole war effort suffers. In the course of the ensuing muddle, his beloved friend, Patroclus, is killed in single combat by one of the Trojan princes called Hector.*

### **A Killer Kills a Killer**

Achilles goes mad with grief and rage and revenge. He kills Hector and then mutilates his body, dragging it behind a chariot. Achilles then refuses to give the body back to the family for burial, which means in the Greek culture, the Greek understanding, that Hector's soul will wander, eternally lost.

Then one night Priam, the king of Troy, Hector's father, who is now an old man, comes into the Greek camp incognito and makes his way to Achilles' tent to ask for the body of his son. Everybody is shocked

when the old man pulls back the hood of his cloak and shows himself.

Achilles looks at him and then thinks of his own father and begins to weep. Priam looks upon the man who has murdered his son Hector and so many others as well, and he too starts to weep. The sound of their weeping is heard outside their tent.

### **Weeping Together Creates a Bond**

The Greeks believed that weeping together created a permanent bond between people. So then Achilles takes the body of Hector and hands it very tenderly to his father. The two men look at each other and see each other as who they really are, as children of the Divine.

That is the ethos also found in all religions. It is what is meant by overcoming the horror that we feel when we are under threat of our enemies and beginning to appreciate the other.

It is of great importance that the word for "holy" in Hebrew, applied to God, is "kadosh" – separate, other. It is often perhaps the very otherness of our enemies that can give us hints of that utterly mysterious transcendence which is God.

### **A Few of Armstrong's Books**

*Karen Armstrong, one of the Western experts on Islam, wrote The Battle for God, mostly about the year 1491. During that year, Ferdinand and Isabella kicked the Jews out of Spain and began the hatred between Christians and Jews and Muslims, right before Columbus sailed.*

*Among some of many other books, she also wrote A History of God, The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam; a definitive biography of Mohammad; another definitive biography, of the Buddha; The Battle for God, A History of Fundamentalism; and then The Spiral Staircase, which is her autobiography.*

*So far in this sermon series, we've looked at: Gary Zukav, a scientist; Mother Teresa;*

*Marcus Borg, a theologian who died a month ago; and now somebody on the world stage who never expected to be there. But Karen Armstrong is a shy, wallflower-type of nun with epilepsy, whom God has used to teach us once again what's at the core of our faith, like the golden rule.*

*Amen.*