

# The curse of the Infidel

[Karen Armstrong]

A century ago Muslim intellectuals admired the west. Why did we lose their goodwill?

On July 15 1099, the crusaders from western Europe conquered Jerusalem, falling upon its Jewish and Muslim inhabitants like the avenging angels from the Apocalypse. In a massacre that makes September 11 look puny in comparison, some 40,000 people were slaughtered in two days. A thriving, populous city had been transformed into a stinking charnel house. Yet in Europe scholar monks hailed this crime against humanity as the greatest event in world history since the crucifixion of Christ.

The crusades destabilised the Near East, but made little impression on the Islamic world as a whole. In the west, however, they were crucial and formative. This was the period when western Christendom was beginning to recover from the long period of barbarism known as the Dark Ages, and the crusades were the first cooperative act of the new Europe as she struggled back on to the international scene.

We continue to talk about "crusades" for justice and peace, and praise a "crusading journalist" who is bravely uncovering some salutary truth, showing that at some unexamined level, crusading is still acceptable to the western soul. One of its most enduring legacies is a profound hatred of Islam.

Before the crusades, Europeans knew very little about Muslims. But after the conquest of Jerusalem, scholars began to cultivate a highly distorted portrait of Islam, and this Islamophobia, entwined with a chronic anti-semitism, would become one of the received ideas of Europe. Christians must have been aware that their crusades violated the spirit of the gospels: Jesus had told his followers to love their enemies, not to exterminate them. This may be the reason why Christian scholars projected their anxiety on to the very people they had damaged.

Thus it was, at a time when Christians were fighting brutal holy wars against Muslims in the Near East, that Islam became known in Europe as an inherently violent and intolerant faith, a religion of the sword. At a time when the popes were trying to impose celibacy on the reluctant clergy, western biographies of the prophet Mohammed, written by priests and monks, depict him, with ill-concealed envy, as a sexual pervert and lecher, who encouraged Muslims to indulge their basest instincts.

At a time when feudal Europe was riddled with hierarchy, Islam was presented as an anarchic religion that gave too much respect and freedom to menials, such as slaves and women. Christians could not see Islam as separate from themselves; it had become, as it were, their shadow-self, the opposite of everything that they thought they were or hoped they were not. In fact, the reality was very different. Islam, for example, is not the intolerant or violent religion of western fantasy. Mohammed was forced to fight against the city of Mecca, which had vowed to exterminate the new Muslim community, but the Koran, the inspired scripture that he brought to the Arabs, condemns aggressive warfare and permits only a war of self-defence. After five years of warfare, Muhammad (salAllahu alayhi wasalam) turned to more

peaceful methods and finally conquered Mecca by an ingenious campaign of non-violence. After the prophet's death, the Muslims established a vast empire that stretched from the Pyrenees to the Himalayas, but these wars of conquest were secular, and were only given a religious interpretation after the event.

In the Islamic empire, Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians enjoyed religious freedom. This reflected the teaching of the Koran, which is a pluralistic scripture, affirmative of other traditions. Muslims are commanded by God to respect the "people of the book", and reminded that they share the same beliefs and the same God.

Muhammad had not intended to found a new religion; he was simply bringing the old religion of the Jews and the Christians to the Arabs, who had never had a prophet before. Constantly the Koran explains that Mohammed has not come to cancel out the revelations brought by Adam, Abraham, Moses or Jesus. Today, Muslim scholars have argued that had Mohammed known about the Buddhists and Hindus, the native Americans or the Australian Aborigines, the Koran would have endorsed their sages and shamans too, because all rightly guided religion comes from God.

But so entrenched are the old medieval ideas that western people find it difficult to believe this. We continue to view Islam through the filter of our own needs and confusions. The question of women is a case in point. None of the major world faiths has been good to women but, like Christianity, Islam began with a fairly positive message, and it was only later that the religion was hijacked by old patriarchal attitudes. The Koran gives women legal rights of inheritance and divorce, which western women would not receive until the 19th century. The Koran does permit men to take four wives, but this was not intended to pander to male lust, it was a matter of social welfare: it enabled widows and orphans to find a protector, without whom it was impossible for them to survive in the harsh conditions of 7th-century Arabia.

Colonialists such as Lord Cromer, the consul general of Egypt from 1883 to 1907, like the Christian missionaries who came in their wake, professed a horror of veiling. Until Muslims abandoned this barbarous practice, Cromer argued in his monumental *Modern Egypt*, they could never advance in the modern world and needed the supervision of the west. But Lord Cromer was a founder member in London of the Men's League for Opposing Women's Suffrage. Yet again, westerners were viewing Islam through their own muddled preconceptions, but this cynicism damaged the cause of feminism in the Muslim world and gave the veil new importance as a symbol of Islamic and cultural integrity.

We can no longer afford this unbalanced view of Islam, which is damaging to ourselves as well as to Muslims. We should recall that during the 12th century, Muslim scholars and scientists of Spain restored to the west the classical learning it had lost during the Dark Ages. We should also remember that until 1492, Jews and Christians lived peaceably and productively together in Muslim Spain - a coexistence that was impossible elsewhere in Europe.

At the beginning of the 20th century, nearly every single Muslim intellectual was in love with the west, admired its modern society, and campaigned for democracy and constitutional government in their own countries. Instead of seeing the west as their enemy, they recognised it as compatible with their own traditions. We should ask ourselves why we have lost this goodwill.