

# **Karen Armstrong's Views on Religious Fundamentalism An Analysis of the Book: "The Battle for God"**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*This study evaluates the views on religious fundamentalism of British writers and orientalist Karen Armstrong. Religious fundamentalism has become a tragic issue in the contemporary world. Fundamentalism has appeared at the end of the twentieth century as one of the most influential forces in the contemporary world. In the book, The Battle for God, Karen Armstrong compassionately shows us how and why fundamentalist groups arose into existence and what they want to attain. It's notable that the influence of western civilization has changed every aspect of life, often painful and violent, even if liberating. Armstrong argues that one of the most important things that entirely changed was religion. This civilization actually was anti-religion. People could no longer think about or experience the divine in the same way; they had to develop new forms of faith to fit their new circumstances. This book is an example of an academic effort to portray fundamentalism as a most powerful force of work and we cannot ignore it at any moment in human history. Religious fundamentalism is not merely a static idea but now it has become a dynamic movement and tries to influence and change the world by its ideology and power in a different but surprising way. This study reveals religious fundamentalism is a very dangerous problem in the modern world. Only Islam which is a religion of peace is not responsible for it. But some people misinterpret its teachings according to their wishes and whims. In the modern world, there is a dire need to give proper space to religion and spread its peaceful and kind teachings in the society for interfaith harmony and peaceful co-existence. Analytical and critical approaches have been adopted in this study with qualitative research methodology to maintain its findings.*

## **KEYWORDS:**

*Karen Armstrong, Religion, Fundamentalism, Analysis, the Battle for God.*

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## **Introduction:**

In contemporary age, fundamentalism and extremism has become a threat to peace and prosperity in all over the world. But there is a perception that the roots of the fundamentalism and religious militancy are founded in the ancient history of the religions as well. "During the 1920s fundamentalists actively fought against modernism in their churches and against evolution in their schools"<sup>1</sup> The extreme followers of the different religions interrupted their religions according to their point of views and then use it to take control and power on the public and opponents.

It is observed from the teachings of the religions that every religion presents peaceful teachings special the reveled religions and scriptures. In addition, when religions leave their peaceful path and adopt extreme teachings then the religious fundamentalism produced and damage the religious sprit as well as the peace of world too. Narrow mind set have important behavioral problems such as prejudice, intolerance, injustice, and inequality. Sometime it develop its roots in religion as well.

Karen Armstrong is one of the scholars who raised the question that Islam is not only responsible for fundamentalism but other religions also having the idea of religious fundamentalism. In her book sometimes she appreciate struggle and work o fundamentalism movement bur she does not agree at all to their strategy and values. As she write in her book; "Even the most peaceful and law-abiding are perplexing, because they seem so adamantly opposed to many of the most positive values of modern society. Fundamentalists have no time for democracy, pluralism, religious toleration, peacekeeping, free speech, or the separation of church and state"<sup>2</sup>.

Karen Armstrong described new ways of being religious fundamentalism. Its Philosophy were emerged in almost every major faith and tradition. Focusing on and, she examines the ways of Muslim fundamentalism in Egypt and Iran, Protestant fundamentalism in the United States and Jewish fundamentalism in Israel. In this context, this study presents the critical review of the book "The Battle for God"<sup>3</sup> written by a well-known scholar of the modern era "Karen Armstrong".

## **Introduction to the author:**

Karen Armstrong is a renowned Orientalist and known as a famous scholar of the Comparative Religion in all over the world. Her favorite topic is history of religion and fundamentalism. She was born on November 14, 1944 at Wild Moor, Worcestershire, in England with Irish family back ground.<sup>4</sup> She is a British author and commentator who have written more than twenty books on religious studies. She started her career as a Nun from a Catholic Christian Society.

She left her Nunnery order in 1962 when she was an Oxford university student and exited from a traditional to a more liberal faith. She has also taught as a teacher in Convent School of England. She wrote a book in his early ages on "Through the narrow Gate" in 1981.<sup>5</sup> When she was teaching, "During her teaching career, "Through the Narrow Gate" which gave her a sigh of relief after a long struggle of dissatisfaction and isolation".<sup>6</sup>

After leaving the Oxford University, she started studying and writing on Comparative Religion as an Orientalist and write many important books in this field. She wrote on the topics which harmonize the followers of sematic religions (Islam, Christianity and Judaism).She wrote in favor of the Holy Prophet Muhammad ﷺ.As she is explaining:

"But I realized that many Western people had no opportunity to revise their impression of Muhammad, so I decided to write a popular accessible account of his life to challenge this entrenched view".<sup>7</sup>

In 1988, she wrote her first famous book on religions "The Holy war", whose erudition and insights have justly earned her great renown. Now a day, Karen Armstrong has become an eminent and the best book seller author in the West. Her Books are widely read all over the world. It may be said that now a day she Become an Authority on Religious Studies. Her advocates and critics both try to read her books keenly and deeply. After 9/11 the people have more affiliation and interest to her books. From 1982 to 2019 she wrote many books and Her First book was "Through the narrow Gate (1981) and last is "A case for God "(2016).<sup>8</sup> She has won many awards on religious studies and book writings. Her book the 4,000-Years Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, have become an international best seller book as well as that is now have become prerequisite reading in many theology and religious studies courses. Her work focuses on commonalities of the major religions and philosophies. In her book she wrote about the history of God form Prophet Abraham (Ibrahim AS) till now. <sup>9</sup> On the Philosophies she given here unique idea about different aspects of religious philosophies. Like a specific word

"Spirituality' needs comment. While it might be taken to include the ideas of traditional religions-such as Christianity, Islam or Judaism-its emphasis lies more on the personal values and beliefs of the individual, which they regard as giving themselves meaning and significance."<sup>10</sup>

### **Introduction to the Book:**

"The battle for God" is the interesting and valuable book of Karen Armstrong. It was written in 2000. In this book the author describes the history and causes of fundamentalism in three reveled religions; Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The book consists of two parts and Ten Chapters

with 424 pages. This book is published by Random House publishing Group, New York, America, in 2001.

### **Definition of Fundamentalism:**

It is necessary to understand the term Fundamentalism in an author's vision. Karen Armstrong presents different views regarding fundamentalism. She elaborates the Fundamentalism likewise;

“It is a ... term. American Protestants were the first to use it. The fundamentalists wanted to go back to the basics and re-emphasized the fundamentals of the Christian traditions, which they identified with a literal interpretation of scriptures and the acceptance of certain core doctrine”.<sup>11</sup>

Fundamentalism has been a most debatable term in contemporary intellectual discourse. Many modern writers make it his focal point of research. Karen Armstrong also explained it.

By explaining fundamentalism, she says;

“Each fundamentalism is a law unto itself and has its own dynamic. This has also been argued that this Christian term cannot be accurately applied to movements that have entirely different priorities. Muslim and Jewish fundamentalism, for example is not much concerned with doctrine. A literal meaning of fundamentalism in Arabic is Usūliyyah, a word that refers to the study of the sources of the various rules and principles of Islamic Law”.<sup>12</sup>

According to the her views, the use of the term Fundamentalism is, therefore misleading and many scholars use it their opponents with wrong perception, and it creates many difficulties for religions and societies.

### **Part One: The Old and New World**

This part of the book consists of four chapters. The author describes the ancient history of the fundamentalism from Jews, Christians and Muslims. Summary of this chapter is given below:

#### **Chapter No. 1, Jews: the precursors (1492-1700):**

An author tries to find out the roots of fundamentalism in old and traditional religion from the history. For example, the Muslims and Jews were living in the Spain for many years. When the Christians were derived out of the Muslims and Jews from Spain at the time of the fall out of Spain in 1492, then there was a very difficult situation especially for Jews to act up on their traditional religion. So there were three aspect of this reaction in Jews community.

1. To adopt Christianity and Moderation
2. To migrate in Muslims areas to turn aside from world's affairs and to join Ghettos life.

### 3. To Join Terrorism Activities

She writes in her book, *Holy war*: “In a Jewish holy war, there was no question of peaceful coexistence, mutual respect or peace treaties.”<sup>13</sup>

### **Chapter No. 2, Muslims: The Conservative spirits (1492-1799)**

According to the author, the roots of Muslim fundamentalism are founded in 16th century when it was the beginning of modern science and modernity in the West. The Othman Caliphate (Khilāphat –e- Usmānia)<sup>14</sup> was getting influence from modern sciences and modernity of the West after the decline of Spain. The Jews were the first victims of this new phenomenon and then Muslims become the hunt of this modern tool. In the very beginning of Western renaissance movement<sup>15</sup>, the Othman Caliphate was very strong and also getting the victories against West. So the modernity did not influence the Muslims very much. When the Othman Caliphate become weaker in 17th Century and the West become the powerful, then the Muslims also become the plunge of the modern Western civilization. In this time, we see some different trends in Muslim community due to reaction of secular modernity.

1. Interesting in Battinis (Hidden) movements
2. Interesting in Sufis (Mysticism) movements
3. Try to reform the Muslim (Reformers) Society and State

### **Chapter No. 3, Christians: Brave new world (1492-1870):**

According to the author the roots of Christian's fundamentalism were also founded in 16th century. When it was the beginning of modern sciences and modernity in the West, the Christianity had become the most targets of the science and secular modernity in the west because the religion related to the 'Mythos'<sup>16</sup> and the modern science related to the 'Logos'<sup>17</sup>. So there was a big conflict between Modern science and Christianity because the Protestant Christian Scholars interpreted the Bible word to word and said that the Bible is 100 % true and Word of God, while, the modern science were proving the religious theories are wrong. For example the Evolution theory of Darwin and Gentile theory of Newton etc. So we see a Crusade between Christianity and the modern science. In this battlefield the science became victorious. After this conflict we see three major trends in Christianity;

1. To adopt the Modernity and Science
2. To adopt Mysticism and turn aside the world's affairs
3. To adopt the Fundamentalism

She writes about the fundamentalism of Christianity that “The Roman Empire had destroyed the Jewish homeland and during the second and third centuries it sometimes seemed as though it would also destroy Christianity.”<sup>18</sup>

### **Chapter No. 4, Jews and Muslims Modernize (1700-1870):**

The Author describes the Clash of Muslims and Jews to the Modernity and their strategy to compete. When the Muslims and Jews influence from the modernity and science then some Jews went to reformation in Religion and the rest of them went to the fundamentalism and adopted the opposition of modernity because according to them, the Modernity were impacting badly to their traditional Religion. Especially, when the French and other Western countries behaved cruelly and physically started to persecute the Jews. After this injustice behavior, the majority of Jews had become the fundamentalists and they started the underground movements to save their Religion. For example: Misnagedim<sup>19</sup>, Haskalah<sup>20</sup>, Maskalim<sup>21</sup>, Neo-orthodoxy etc. are some examples of the old Jews fundamentalist movements. In the 18th century when Napoleon Bonaparte conquered the Egypt and he brought with him the modernity and science from the West. Although the Egyptians had gotten freedom from Napoleon Bonaparte forces with the help of British forces but when the British return the Egypt to the Turkish, the Egyptians refused to accept this decision and they try to get rid of the Turkish Government.

In the beginning of the 19th century, Muhammad Ali captured the government with the help of Egyptian Religious Scholars (Ulama). Muhammad Ali was an able Officer and wants to modernize the Egypt. In the same time, the Shah of Iran tried to modernize the Iran. The Muslim Ulamā adopt many trends some separated himself from the politics and some adopt the fundamentalism to compete the modernity and defend his religion. For example the Hashāshīn, Shakhīs, Bābīs, Baha'is and some other fundamental movements are the main examples of this era.

## **Part Two: The Fundamentalism**

This part of the book consists of six chapters. In this part the author describes the modern history of Fundamentalism from 19th century to 20th century. Summary of the chapter is given below:

### **Chapter No. 5, Battle Lines (1870-1900):**

In the 19th century, when the Modernity came into the Muslim countries from the West, the Western Empire were capturing the Muslim countries and trying to implement the Modernity in these countries. This action created trouble and Muslim scholars showed their reaction strongly against the secular Modernity. When there have difficulties for Muslim to act upon their traditional religion, then the Muslims became fundamentalist to act upon their religious traditions.

When the Modernity increased the pressure on Jews and interfered in their religious affairs, the Jews religious scholars began to think that a separate country is necessary to act upon Judaism freely. Theodor Hartselle was the first leader of this thought in Jews.

In Western countries at the end of war between Christianity and Modern Science, while the Modern Science had become victorious against traditional religion and had made separate the religion from the state affairs, the Christian religious scholars started war against Modernity in a new way. They said at the completion of two thousand years (2nd millennium), the universe will be ended and destroyed. This Idea is called Pre-millennialism in Protestant Christians. This theory became very hot and famous in Christian's community because according to them, God's promise near to completion and day of salvation has come near. Dwight Moody is the leader of this Christian Fundamental vision.

### **Chapter No. 6, Fundamentals (1900-1925):**

After the spread of Secular modernity and Modern Science in all over the world, there had become two schools of thought in every country of the East and West. One of them was Modern Secular and understood the religion is not more than a personal issue of a man and cannot be allowed religion to interfere the state matters. This class was in government and very powerful and was considered himself the owner of everything.

The second class was religious persons and was very poor, weak and had not any right in economy and state affairs. When the Moderates pressurize them and try to ban the religion, this age was the harsh clash of religion and Secular modernity. There was a tension in different countries between the Religious persons of Jews, Christians, Muslims and the Secular moderates. In this war between Religion and Secularism, the moderates had become victorious.

### **Chapter No. 7 Counterculture (1925-1960):**

This is the age of counter culture between Modernity and Fundamentalism. The Christians, Jews and Muslim were refusing the Modernity and trying to act up on their own cultures as counter culture. They were trying to modernize their religions and were competing the challenges of modernity with more preparation and spirit, so they were established more organized movements against modernity. The fundamentalists acted up on their Religion with traditional spirit and felt happy and proud during this competition.

### **Chapter No. 8, Mobilization (1960-1974):**

This age was a war between secular Modernity and Fundamentalism. That was the age when there were clashes between Modernity and Fundamentalism. The seculars were strongly attacking on the religion and on the other hand Fundamentalists were attacking. The religious Fundamentalists felt that their Religion and Traditions are in danger.

In this regard the fundamental movements strongly defend the religion and protest against secular Modernity in every sphere of life.

### **Chapter No. 9, The offensive (1974-1979):**

According to Karen Armstrong, when the Secularism increased the pressure against religious Fundamentalists and tried to demolish them, the reaction of Fundamentalism was very dangerous, the religious fundamentalism became a kind of militancy. They had made their armed units and were attacking on public points and government assets.

### **Chapter No. 10, Defeat (1979-1999):**

In the end of this clash, the Religious Fundamentalism has become victorious but she says: Actually it is a defeat of Fundamentalism. When were they succeeded against the political governments and secular parties? It was the defeat against Modernity. Because, their fundamentalism have been changed to the Modernism. They could not act up on their religion in an old and traditional way. After the victory of Fundamentalists in America, Israel, Iran and Egypt, their faiths have weak and they tried to make their faith more liberal and modern. The religious Fundamentalists of modern ages are more liberal, democratic and moderate then the past.

According to the Karen Armstrong, today's Ikhwān-ul-Muslimūn of Egypt, Shea's of Iran, Fundamental Zionism of Israel , Fundamentalist Protestantism of America are the modern and liberal shapes of Religion.

### **Critical Analysis of the Book:**

It is an important and researched biased book on the history of religion. A large number of readers in west and America studies from friends and foes both. The methodology is historical, comparative and analytical. This was translated in many languages of the world and even available in Urdu language in Pakistan as well. It has an immense inspiration and a good contribution in the field of comparative religions and orientalism. But according to an observation, some issues need to be properly addressed.

Some of the important issues and observations regarding the book are given below.

- In the book, there is lack of scholarly direct references from main reference books; Quran, Hadith, Tafsīr, Fiqh etc. The references of Quran and Hadith are very short and sometimes are not correct. The author mostly used the Western scholars' books and English translations of Islamic books. This reduce the scholarly work of a renowned scholar and effects on the religion too.
- . In Christianity the focus of writer is on Protestants and there is no much discussion about the Catholics.
- The author mostly defends the Modernity, Western thought and Civilization and criticizes on religion and sometime she accepts the role of religion under the umbrella of modernity as a personal matter.



- In Muslim perspective, the author misinterprets the Jihad and mostly she interpret the jihad and Fundamentalism one thing. The author calls the jihad as reaction of modernity.
- The author tries to understand Islam, Christianity and Judaism in a same way.
- Most of the times the author said the return and practice on Religious Fundamentalism and tries to defend the Modernity and Secularism.
- Karen Armstrong is an active advocate of Unitarianism.
- She suggests the Muslims that they should reinterpret their religious traditions according to the modern ages and trends.
- She appreciates the sacred scriptures of the religions but oppose its traditional interpretation in the modern age.
- She respected Islam and its traditions in its special style but disagree with the practical interpretation from the Muslim scholars.
- She considers the jihad as a new fundamental movement in Islam.

### **Conclusion:**

Commonly this is said Karen Armstrong defends and justifies the Religion and Islam. Although she has a soft corner about religion and Islam but, in fact, this is due to prove herself unbiased. The important conclusion of the book review is below:

1. The author tries to defend the Western Culture, thought and Modernity.
2. She tries to prove the Western Civilization and thought dominant.
3. According to the author, there is a need to reinterpret and reshape the religion according to the modern ages. The old shape of Faith and Religion is not a fruitful in these days.
4. She is an active advocate of Modernity and Western civilization.
5. According to the author, the basic reason of Fundamentalism is fear of mortality clash of Modernity and false interpretation of Religion.
6. She tries to promote the philosophy of utilitarianism, secularism and rationalism.

### **Suggestions& Recommendations:**

Important suggestions and recommendations are as follows:

1. There is a need to answer the objections against Islam.
2. Muslims should understand the methodology of Orientalism and the West.
3. The Muslim students and scholars of comparative religion try to study the books and literature of the Western scholars, critically and analytically.

4. There is an important need to establish a Western study centre to study analytically and critically the Western thoughts and literature.

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3. Ibid.
4. Muhammad Qasim Butt, & Muhammad Sarfaz Khalid, Karen Armstrong as a Biographer of Muhammad: A Critical Study of “Muhammad: Prophet for Our Time”. *Journal of Islamic Studies and Culture*, Vol. 5, No. 2 2017, p:72
5. Karen Armstrong, *Through the Narrow Gate*, Famingo, London, 1997p: 5
6. Butt & Khalid, “Karen Armstrong as a Biographer of Muhammad: A Critical Study of “Muhammad: Prophet for Our Time”, p. 72.
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10. Karen Armstrong, *The Spiral Staircase: A Memoir*, Harper Perennial, London, ,2005 P: 13
11. Keren Armstrong, *The Battle for God*, P:13
12. Ibid ,P: 17.
13. Karen Armstrong, *Holy War (The Crusades and Their Impact on Today’s world)*, Random House, Inc., New York, 1992, P: 8.
14. *Khilāfat-e-Usmāniya: The Ottoman Caliphate (1517–1924)*, under the Ottoman dynasty of the Ottoman Empire, was the last Sunni Islamic caliphate of the late medieval and the early modern era. During the period of Ottoman growth, Ottoman rulers claimed caliphate authority since Murad Its conquest of Edirne in 1362. Later Selim I, through conquering and unification of Muslim lands, became the defender of the Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina which further strengthened the Ottoman claim to caliphate in the Muslim world.
15. *Renaissance Movement: The Renaissance is a period from the 14th to the 17th century, considered the bridge between the middle Ages and Modern history. It started as a cultural movement in Italy in the Late Medieval period and later spread to the rest of Europe. The intellectual basis of the Renaissance was its version of humanism, derived from the concept of Roman Humanities and the rediscovery of classical Greek philosophy, such as that of Protagoras, who said that "Man is the measure of all things." This new thinking became manifest in art, architecture, politics, science and literature. Early examples were the development of perspective in oil painting and the recycled knowledge of how to make concrete.*
16. *Mythos* : The complex of beliefs, values, attitudes, etc., characteristic of a specific group or society. Collins Dictionary Online.

17. Logos: The Word of God, or principle of divine reason and creative order, identified in the Gospel of John with the second person of the Trinity incarnate in Jesus Christ. Collins Dictionary Online.
18. Keren, *The Holy War: The Crusades and Their Impact on Today's World* ,P: 24
19. Misnagedim: It's a Hebrew word meaning "opponents". The term "Misnagedim" commonly refers to opponents of Hasidism. The term "Misnagedim" gained a common usage among Jews living in Europe as the term that referred to Ashkenazi Jews who opposed the rise and spread of early Hasidic Judaism
20. Hasklah: It's an intellectual movement among Jews of eastern Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries that attempted to acquaint the masses with European and Hebrew languages and with secular education and culture to supplement Talmudic studies
21. Maskalim :The Haskalah, often termed Jewish Enlightenment was an intellectual movement among the Jews of Central and Eastern Europe, with certain influence on those in Western Europe and the Muslim world.