

Nayef Al-Rodhan Prize for Transcultural Understanding

THE NAYEF AL-RODHAN PRIZE was founded by Dr Al-Rodhan in 2012 after discussions with Sir Adam Roberts (President of the British Academy 2009-2013) had identified the need for a significant prize in the field of international relations – and, more generally, transcultural understanding. Dr Al-Rodhan has written extensively on the subject, and hopes that the prize will bring scholarly contribution to the forefront of public debate on the issue. The Nayef Al-Rodhan Prize for Transcultural Understanding is the Academy's most valuable prize, and will be awarded annually at least until 2017.

At a ceremony held at the British Academy on 4 July 2013, the inaugural Nayef Al-Rodhan Prize was awarded to Karen Armstrong – in recognition of her body of work that has made a significant contribution to inter-faith understanding.

Dr Nayef Al-Rodhan (St Antony's College, Oxford; Director, Centre for the Geopolitics of Globalisation and Transnational Security) said: 'The idea of a shared history, the knowledge of our debt to each other and

the urgent need to nurture positive and responsible transcultural relations are important. Pursuing transcultural work is not just a wonderful, moral, elegant, intellectual pastime. It is actually a prerequisite to a successful global system in a globalised world. In the old days, you could get away with some things, although not for very long. In today's world of instant connectivity and deepening interdependence, it is impossible to ignore a state or a culture or a sub-culture, no matter how distant, how different or how dysfunctional. We are in it together, because of globalisation. Unless everybody wins, none of us will win.'

Professor Dame Helen Wallace, Foreign Secretary of the British Academy, who had chaired the prize jury, said: 'We at the British Academy are wholeheartedly committed to promoting international and transnational engagement, and this prize gives us a wonderful way of recognising outstanding contributions to this objective.'



Dr Nayef Al-Rodhan, Karen Armstrong, and Professor Sir Adam Roberts FBA, at the British Academy on 4 July 2013.



Professor Dame Helen Wallace FBA, who chaired the prize jury, said: 'Karen Armstrong is a world-renowned scholar, author and commentator. Her work focuses on commonalities of the major religions, and is celebrated for bringing together different faith communities and encouraging mutual understanding of shared traditions. Karen Armstrong addresses big themes with wide resonance.'

The following is an edited version of Karen Armstrong's acceptance speech:

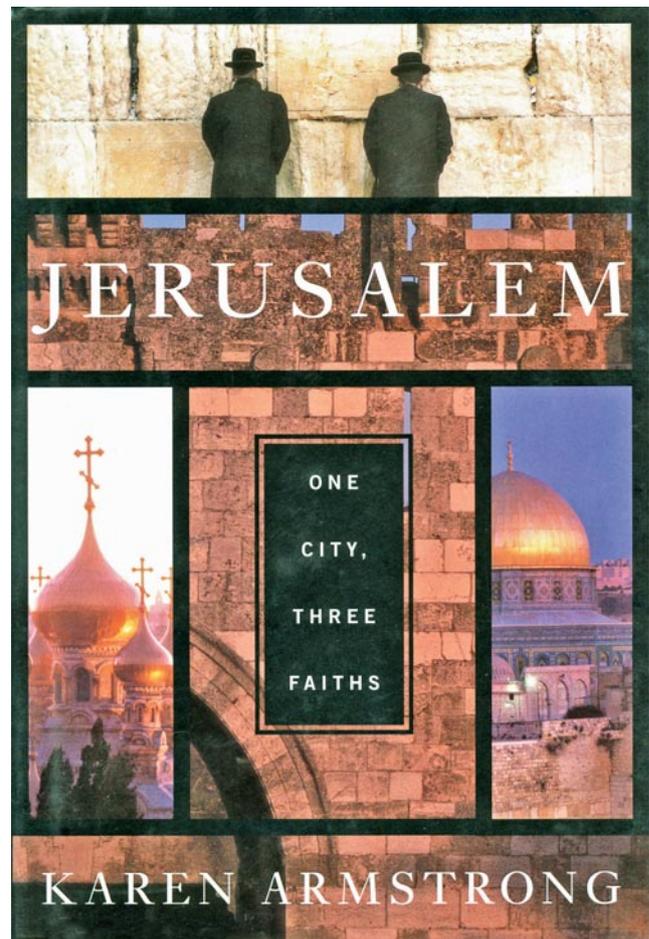
I have become convinced over the years that unless we learn to treat other people as we would wish to be treated ourselves, and learn to appreciate – not merely to 'tolerate' – our significant and revealing differences, the world is simply not going to be a viable place. I sometimes give a lecture entitled 'Compassion: Nice idea or urgent global imperative?' This is a pivotal and dangerous moment in world history, and we all have a duty to do whatever we can in our own particular field – in the media, education, business, politics or the arts – to increase our understanding of our neighbours in the global village that we have created.

Our world is more deeply interconnected than ever before; we are linked together on the World Wide Web. Our financial institutions are interdependent: when markets fall in one part of the world, stocks plummet all around the globe that day; the state of our own economy is affected by the economies of China or Africa. What happens today in Gaza or Afghanistan today can have violent repercussions tomorrow in London or New York. Yet still, so often, we speak as though we ourselves, and our culture and civilisation are in a special, separate, privileged category. This no longer chimes with the realities of the world we live in. One of the most urgent tasks of our time must surely be to build a global community where people of all ethnicities and ideologies can live together in mutual respect.

The science of compassion

In the very early days of Channel 4, I was commissioned to work in Jerusalem on a documentary series on St Paul; there I encountered Judaism and Islam. So parochial was my religious understanding at that time that I had never seen Judaism as anything but a prelude to Christianity and had rarely given Islam a single thought. But in Jerusalem, where you are constantly confronted by all three of the Abrahamic faiths, you become aware not only of the conflict between these faiths, but also of their profound interconnections and similarities. I pursued this in depth in my book *A History of God*.

During my research for this book, I came upon a footnote that turned my life around in Marshall G.S. Hodgson's magisterial three-volume work, *The Venture of Islam*. Commenting on an esoteric form of medieval Islamic mysticism, Hodgson cited the great French Islamist Louis Massignon, who had insisted that the historian of religion must approach premodern traditions with, what he called, 'the science of compassion'. We cannot, Massignon said, approach the spiritualities of the past from the vantage point of post-Enlightenment rationalism. We have to leave our 20th-century perspective and, in a scholarly manner, make the intellectual, social, economic and political milieu that gave birth to these ideas such a vibrant reality for ourselves that we could imagine feeling the same. In this way, said Massignon, you broaden your horizons, and make a place for the other in your mind and heart. It followed that when, for example, I was writing about the Prophet Muhammad, I had to enter the mind of a man living in the hell of 7th-century Arabia who sincerely believed that he had been touched by God. Unless I could lay aside my 20th-century scepticism and embrace this mindset insofar as I could in a scholarly but empathetic manner, I would miss the essence of



'Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths' (1996) is one of the books for which Karen Armstrong was awarded the Nayef Al-Rodhan Prize for Transcultural Understanding. Others include 'A History of God: The 4,000 Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam' (1993), and 'The Great Transformation: The Beginning of our Religious Traditions' (2006)



Karen Armstrong speaks at the award ceremony, held at the British Academy on 4 July 2013.

Muhammad. Today this is a challenge not only for the historian, but for us all: we cannot have a peaceful world unless we hospitably open our minds to the ‘other’.

Socrates

This compassion and respect is also central to the rational tradition of the West, as founded by Socrates.

When people engaged in conversation with Socrates, they thought they knew exactly what they were talking about. But after half an hour of Socrates’ relentless questioning, they found they did not know the first thing about such essential matters as courage or beauty or justice. A Socratic discourse, as described by Plato, nearly always ends with a moment of shocking *aporia* – of radical doubt – as the participants experienced the depth of their ignorance. Yet that painful moment, Socrates said, made one a philosopher. On the last day of his life, he said that he was wise in only one respect: that he knew he knew nothing at all. A truly rational person, Socrates insisted, must subject every single one of his or her received opinions and most stridently-held convictions to stringent examination. We cannot achieve transcultural understanding unless we lay aside the omniscience that characterises so much contemporary discourse and realise how little we truly know about one another.

Socrates also said that a truly rational debate would be ineffective if it was not conducted in a gentle and kindly manner. There was no point entering into dialogue unless you were prepared to be profoundly changed by the encounter and allow your conversation-partner to unsettle some of your certainties. Today, however, our discourse tends to be extremely aggressive: in politics, the media and academia, it is often not enough for us to seek the truth, we also have to defeat and even humiliate our opponents; indeed, ‘dialogue’ often simply means bludgeoning our opponents to accept our own opinions – an attitude that we can no longer afford.

Ibn Arabi

At about the same time as I learned about the science of compassion, I came upon this quotation from the great 13th-century Sufi philosopher Muid ad-Din ibn al-Arabi, which immediately resonated with me. He was talking about religion, but I think it can also apply to any political, national, or intellectual ideology that we hold dear and can help us to achieve a truly transcultural understanding:

Do not praise your own faith so exclusively that you disbelieve all the rest; if you do this you will miss much good; nay, you will fail to recognise the real truth of the matter. God, the omnipresent and omniscient, cannot

be confined to any one creed, for he says [in the Quran]: 'Wheresoever ye turn, there is the face of Allah.' Everybody praises what he knows; his God is his own creature and in praising it, he praises himself. Consequently he blames the beliefs of others, which he would not do if he were just, but his dislike is based on ignorance.

The Persians

Every single one of us has pain. Unless we learn to appreciate the pain of others – even our enemies – we can never achieve a peaceful, viable world. The Greeks understood this. During the 5th century, they invented the genre of tragic drama which put suffering on stage and made the audience watch a man or woman in extremity. The plays usually reflected a problem that was currently preoccupying Athens. Periodically, the leader of the Chorus would turn to the audience and tell them to weep for such polluted human beings as Oedipus, who had violated every taboo in the book. And the Greeks did weep – because they believed that weeping together created a bond between people.

The earliest tragedy to come down to us was Aeschylus' *The Persians*; it is one of the very first accounts we have of

a painful encounter between East and West. Aeschylus presented this drama about seven years after the Greeks achieved a landmark victory over the Persians at the naval battle of Salamis. But before that battle, the Persian army had rampaged through Athens, looting, burning, and trashing the city. Yet in his tragedy, Aeschylus was asking the Athenians to weep for the Persians. There is no triumphalism, no gloating. The play makes us see Salamis from the point of view of the defeated. The Persians are presented as a people in mourning; they are hailed as a sister nation, equal to the Greeks in dignity and grace. Could we put on a play in the West End presenting the events that followed 9/11 in such a way that we not only enter into the perspective of the Muslim world but weep for their pain?

This must surely be our task today. Instead of using our own pain as a springboard that incites us to inflict more suffering and so initiate an escalating spiral of violence, we must approach the tragic events of our time with accuracy and empathy. We need to cultivate the science of compassion that enables us to transcend our own interests and lay aside our personal, national and cultural agendas in the interests of peace, broadening our horizons and making a place for the other in our minds and hearts.