

Muhammad in The West: Analysis of the Historical Description of the Prophet Muhammad in Armstrong's Writings

Masmuni Mahatma^{1*}

¹ IAIN Syaikh Abdurrahman Siddik Bangka Belitung; Indonesia; e-mail: masmuni@iainsasbabel.ac.id

* Correspondence

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Abstract: The main objectives of this study are to analyze and understand: (1) the general constructions of the Prophet Muhammad in the descriptions of Western writers; and (2) Armstrong's description of the Prophet Muhammad. This study is library research that uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive-critical method. Data were collected by reading various biographical literature on Prophet Muhammad from Western writers, which were grouped into three criteria: orientalist writers, revisionist writers, and popular writers. The results of the study show that: (1) there is a dynamic dialectic in the description of the figure of the Prophet Muhammad by Western writers, both from orientalist circles, such as W. Montgomery Watt, David Samuel Margoliouth, Edward Said, revisionists such as Patricia Crone, Michael Cook, Fred M. Donner, and popular writers like Karen Armstrong. This dynamic shows that the effort to understand the figure of the Prophet Muhammad is an important effort to understand Islam in Western society; and (2) Armstrong's description as the author of popular religious studies books about the figure of the Prophet Muhammad; made a major contribution to reducing various misunderstandings about Islam and the figure of the Prophet Muhammad in the eyes of Western society.

Keywords: Islam; Karen Armstrong; Muhammad; Orientalist; Revisionist.

Abstrak: Tujuan utama dari penelitian ini adalah untuk menganalisis dan memahami: (1) konstruksi umum Nabi Muhammad dalam deskripsi penulis Barat; dan (2) deskripsi Armstrong tentang Nabi Muhammad. Penelitian ini merupakan penelitian kepustakaan yang menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode deskriptif-kritis. Data dikumpulkan dengan membaca berbagai literatur biografi Nabi Muhammad dari penulis Barat, yang dikelompokkan menjadi tiga kriteria: penulis orientalis, penulis revisionis, dan penulis populer. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa: (1) terdapat dialektika dinamis dalam penggambaran sosok Nabi Muhammad oleh penulis Barat, baik dari kalangan orientalis, seperti W. Montgomery Watt, David Samuel Margoliouth, Edward Said, revisionis seperti Patricia Crone, Michael Cook, Fred M. Donner, dan penulis populer seperti Karen Armstrong. Dinamika ini menunjukkan bahwa upaya memahami sosok Nabi Muhammad merupakan upaya penting untuk memahami Islam di masyarakat Barat; dan (2) gambaran Armstrong sebagai penulis buku-buku kajian agama populer tentang sosok Nabi Muhammad; memberikan kontribusi besar dalam meredakan berbagai kesalahpahaman tentang Islam dan sosok Nabi Muhammad di mata masyarakat Barat.

Kata Kunci: Islam; Karen Armstrong; Muhammad; Orientalis; Revisionis.

1. Introduction

The debate about whether Islamic teachings inspire violence, or as claimed by adherents of Islam as teachings that inspire peace, often becomes an endless polemic. Whenever attempts to explain Islam as a religion full of grace are made, various terrors in the name of religion (Islam) appear at the same time as contradictory facts to the claim that Islam is a teaching of grace. This condition then reaped a lot of polemic in society, not only among Muslims but also in Western society, who in

general still do not know and understand Islamic teachings (J. Abbink, 2011; Jon Abbink, 2020; Atmaja, 2016; C. Smith, 2015).

Over the last two decades, especially after the 9/11 tragedy or the attacks by terrorist groups which claimed to be part of the Al-Qaeda organization against symbols of America and the West (WTC twin towers and the Pentagon), the image of Islam has undergone a drastic degradation (Selod, 2015). Islam is then depicted not only as a religion that does not only justify terror and violence or as a religion that considers the Western world as an enemy that must be eliminated but also incompatible with rational civilization, human rights, democracy, and scientific progress. Even though at the same time there are counter-discourses that try to explain Islam and its teachings in a more positive way, it is difficult to clear up the negative image of Islam that is already embedded in society (Huda, 2015).

The depiction of Islam which is full of negative accusations is indeed like a double-edged sword. This negative image, on the one hand, makes people suspicious of Islam and its adherents. However, this negative image of Islam, on the other hand, has also created a special interest for some Westerners to learn about Islam. Islam is a monotheistic religion like Judaism and Christianity, with a very large number of adherents on earth (1.93 billion people). If Islam is completely portrayed as a bad teaching, how is it possible that its billions of adherents can survive and steadfastly carry out their beliefs? The public's interest and curiosity about Islam make the study of the figure of the Prophet Muhammad as the bearer of Islamic teachings important, especially in Western society, both in Europe and America. John V. Tolan (2019), in *Faces of Muhammad* said: "*The prophet of Islam, Muhammad has always been at the center of European discourse on Islam.*"

The problem that arises is that the study of Islam, which is directed at studying the history of the Prophet Muhammad as the Prophet who started the spread of Islamic teachings, often contains more negative descriptions and depictions, especially those recorded in the works of early writers on the life history of the Prophet Muhammad. Western writers in the period of the 12th to 17th centuries, for example, described the figure of Muhammad in a negative description (the Prophet was described as a warlike prophet or was described as an idol of Muslims) and also became a negative preference for Western Christians regarding Islam (Tolan, 2019). Buaben (2007), states that in the Middle Ages to early modern times, there was a tendency for non-sequitur inference to generalize erroneous judgments into historical facts. The figure of Muhammad must be killed by his character through bad depiction, which this attempt is a religious act that must be carried out by Christian writers. The principle that these Christian writers must agree with, as explained by Daniel (2009), is that anything that harms the enemy of truth (Christianity), is most likely the truth itself. Thus, writers such as Guibert of Nogent for example admit that he has no sources for his work on Muhammad, but he believes that 'it would be safe to speak ill of a man whose ferocity outweighs anything that can be said to be evil' (Buaben, 2007; Southern, 1962).

This depiction of the Prophet Muhammad, filled with negative stories, fables, and allegories, persisted throughout the Middle Ages. Although there were changes in the descriptions of writers in later periods regarding the figure of the Prophet Muhammad, especially those inspired by the need to revise the correct historical writing methodology, the need to use more reliable historical references, and the demands of scientific responsibility for the work produced. However, this effort does not necessarily eliminate the various bad images that are already attached to the description of the figure of the Prophet Muhammad in Christian Western society. At the same time, there are certain interests in studying Islam or the figure of the Prophet Muhammad in more depth, which is not always purely academic or to seek historical truth about Islam.

A tendency has begun to emerge to acknowledge the honor of the Prophet and his ability (from the point of view of his humanity) to form a new society and inspire his followers with noble character, patience, compassion, as well as various superior qualities of the Prophet's personality, as can be found in various statements by orientalist, such as Jan Lake, Laura Veccia Vaglieri, Gustave Le Bon, Washington Irvin, Ignac Goldziher, Edward Said, W. Montgomery Watt, and others. These orientalist who studied Islam and the figure of the Prophet Muhammad, regardless of their interests,

did not even hesitate to praise the Prophet and acknowledge his success in reforming Arab society at that time.

Various efforts to learn about the figure of the Prophet Muhammad have also emerged, especially from Muslim historians and academics who are trying to clear up the history of the Prophet from the diversity and polemics related to certain matters which often do not have a clear historical basis, but are already deeply rooted in society. Several well-known biographers of the Prophet, such as Shafiyurrahman Al-Mubarakfuri, M. Husain Haekal, Mahdi Rizqullah Ahmad, Mohammad Jebara, and others, offer diverse perspectives in one pull of the same enthusiasm to clarify the picture of the figure of the Prophet. Popular writers such as Martin Lings, Annemarie Schimmel, and Karen Armstrong, in this context, also participate in providing different perspectives in understanding and describing the figure of the Prophet Muhammad.

The diversity of perspectives and constructions offered regarding the figure of the prophet Muhammad indicates that in terms of historical descriptions of the figure of the Prophet Muhammad, this academic tradition does not merely explain "true history." Quoting Von Ranke, if the main purpose of history is as simple as showing how history happened (*wie es eigentlich gezoesen*), then people will face the risk of losing their most important asset, freedom of thought. Because showing "what happened" tends to only say and agree with what was stated by the earliest writers (Carr, 1987).

At this point, the efforts of contemporary writers in describing the figure of the Prophet, especially Karen Armstrong, who has a fairly wide audience, are certainly worth studying. Because of what Armstrong presented in his various works which commented heavily on religious affairs, such as *Beginning the World* (1983), *The Gospel According to Woman: Christianity's Creation of the Sex War in the West* (1986), *Muhammad: A Western Attempt to Understand Islam* (1991), *The End of Silence: Women and the Priesthood* (1993), *A History of God: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (1993), *The Battle for God: Fundamentalism in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (2000), *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions* (2006), *The Case for God* (2009), *Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence* (2014), *The Lost Art of Scripture: Rescuing the Sacred Texts* (2019), or works that specifically focus on the biography of the Prophet, such as *Muhammad: A Prophet of Our Time* (2006), are a reflection of a non-Muslim Western writer on the figure of the Prophet Muhammad himself, which also illustrates a tendency to understand Islam at te amid various negative prejudices and fear of Islamic teachings (islamophobia) that accompanies Western society at large.

Various efforts to broaden and develop perspectives and understanding of the figure of the Prophet, as was done by Armstrong or other biographers of the Prophet, have made an important contribution to the depiction of the figure of the Prophet. This contribution is not only for Western people who are not familiar with it but also for Muslim society as a whole. However, whether the descriptions of these popular writers are enough to change the views and stereotypes of Western society towards the figure of the Prophet Muhammad and the Islamic teachings he brought, requires more comprehensive research. This study only focuses on reading, analyzing, and understanding the general construction of the figure of the Prophet Muhammad in the descriptions of Western writers in general, as well as the descriptions of Karen Armstrong in her work on the figure of the Prophet Muhammad in particular.

2. Literature Review

There are various important works and research related to the reading of the figure of the Prophet Muhammad in the eyes of writers and Western society in general. The study conducted by Shamsuddin et al. (2012), which took the title *Two Different Images of the Prophet Muhammad and His Message in the East and the West*, shows that Islam and the figure of the Prophet Muhammad are misunderstood by Western society as teachings that justify violence and hatred of other beliefs that differ from them. The Prophet Muhammad is especially seen as a prophetic figure who spread his teachings by the sword, war, and terror. This condition is described as a condition that was deliberately created by the West as part of the colonialist agenda to destroy Muslims. Similar study

results can also be seen in Khan and Al-Olaqi (2020) who state that there is a wrong image of the figure of the Prophet Muhammad in the eyes of Western society, which has made prejudice against Islam continue to grow to this day.

Another study by Tolan (2019), entitled: *Faces of Muhammad: Western Perceptions of the Prophet of Islam from the Middle Ages to Today*, shows that the Prophet Muhammad has various faces in the understanding of Western society, starting from a bad image of the figure of Muhammad as the bearer of Islamic teachings (Muhammad is depicted as an idol of Muslims, a false prophet, a person with mental disorders, and others), a view that seeks to see the figure of the Prophet Muhammad as a human being with certain ambitions and interests, to a view that begins to give respect and admiration for morals and the achievements of the Prophet Muhammad himself. Tolan (2019) in this regard emphasizes that there is a shift in the perspective of Western society towards Islam and the figure of the Prophet Muhammad, especially when more and more writings enliven the study of Islam and the Prophet Muhammad, both by academics and popular writers.

Another important study collected by Shalem (2013), involving various authors, shows the historical complexity associated with the conceptualization and reconstruction of the figure of the Prophet Muhammad in the West. Changes in descriptions, assumptions, and depictions of the figure of the Prophet Muhammad are said to be an important part that reflects the views of Western society on Islam as a whole as a result of the process of interaction, communication, and responses to various important events involving Islam and its adherents in the West.

Regarding the efforts of contemporary writers to describe the figure of the Prophet Muhammad, such as Karen Armstrong, several studies have been carried out including the study of Butt and Khalid (2017). This study indicates that Karen Armstrong is an important figure who seeks to reconcile views between the East (Islam) and the West (Christianity) through her works that specifically discuss Islam or the Prophet Muhammad. The perspective presented by Armstrong, according to both of them, although it does not accurately describe the figure of the Prophet in several traditions that developed in the Islamic world, has its advantages in efforts to clear up Western society's misunderstandings about Islam and the Prophet Muhammad.

Another study that also involves Armstrong's thoughts and perspectives specifically about the Prophet Muhammad is the study of El-Nagah (2015), which takes the title: *Imaging Prophet Muhammad and the Orient Prototype in English Biography*. This study explains that several contemporary research-based biographers of the Prophet, such as Sir William Muir, D. S. Margoliouth, Montgomery Watt, Edward Said, to Karen Armstrong, have different descriptions and descriptions of the Prophet Muhammad compared to traditional prototype descriptions of the Prophet by sira writers. or teachings received by Muslims.

Some of these studies, apart from the many other studies that have been conducted, generally show a negative view of Islam and the bad image of the Prophet Muhammad in Western society. However, the emergence of several well-known authors and books produced by orientalist, revisionist, or activists of religious and historical studies, who began to provide a more balanced explanation of the figure of the Prophet, more or less began to change the perspective of Western society towards Islam as a whole and the figure of the Prophet Muhammad in particular. Therefore, this study focuses on the description of Islam and the figure of the Prophet Muhammad in several works by western writers, both from orientalist, revisionist, or popular writers, especially Karen Armstrong. The main difference between this study and some previous research is that this study highlights the changing tendency of popular western writers to describe Islam and the figure of the Prophet Muhammad, which is more sympathetic and is believed to be able to change the perception of Western society about Islam and the figure of the Prophet Muhammad.

3. Methods

This study is a literature review that uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive-critical method. The data was collected through reading various biographical literature on the Prophet Muhammad from Western writers divided into three criteria: orientalist writers, revisionist writers,

and populist writers. The works being analyzed are the main works of Western writers, especially from orientalist, revisionist, or popular writers, about Islam and the figure of the Prophet Muhammad. The research procedures carried out are (1) Study preparation (reading literature and drawing relevant themes to be raised); (2) Study implementation (literature documentation and literature study); (3) Data collection (repository and rationalization); (4) Data processing (analysis, interpretation, and evaluation); and (5) Reporting (compilation of results). Considering that this study is a literature study, this study does not involve certain experimental subjects in the process. The author only focuses on the literature studied which is able to provide an overview of the tendency of western writers to describe Islam and the figure of the Prophet Muhammad.

4. Result and Discussions

Construction of the figure of the Prophet Muhammad in the Description of Western Authors

Depictions of the Prophet Muhammad in various works by Western writers, based on the results of a literature review, show important findings regarding differences in views between orientalist, revisionist, and popular writers (who do not belong to the two previous categories), as follows:

First, Christian religious figures in the Middle Ages generally became a reference for Western (European) people in seeing and understanding Islam or the figure of the Prophet Muhammad as the bearer of Islamic teachings. At this time, there was a tendency to portray Islam and the figure of the Prophet Muhammad negatively. The Prophet Muhammad, for example, is depicted as carrying teachings that contradict Christian monotheistic teachings, worshipping many gods and turning himself into idols, spreading terror and violence, and seeing others as enemies outside of himself. This kind of image becomes a fable that is accepted by society, especially during the Crusades and after (Buaben, 2007; Southern, 1962).

There was a new trend that emerged in the following period, especially when the West succeeded in achieving significant developments in the field of knowledge and technology, and succeeded in carrying out the mission of the gospel and colonialism in the Eastern world, to study the Eastern world in terms of society, teachings, ideology, lifestyle, and others, which is often also called orientalism. Many academics and writers have appeared to provide descriptions of the results of their studies on the Eastern world, specifically related to Islam, which then becomes a new preference for people in understanding Islam and the figure of the Prophet Muhammad.

Several depictions related to the figure of the Prophet Muhammad and Islam began to emerge from orientalist writers which were different from the descriptions of previous Western writers. Some of the early (medieval) orientalists, such as Erpenius, Bedwell, Edward Gibbon, Alexander Ross, and others, along with Western interest in the East and the persistence of hostilities between the two, often portrayed Islam and the figure of the Prophet Muhammad in completely negative descriptions. In the following period, namely the 19th century, several prominent orientalist figures, such as Wilfred Cantwell Smith, William Muir, and Sir Hamilton Gibb, began to provide a view that changed from the early period on Islam and the figure of the Prophet Muhammad. Certain descriptions begin to give respect to the excellence of the Prophet Muhammad, even though these descriptions have not been completely separated from narrations that are lame and not following the traditions understood by Muslims (Daniel, 2009; Muir, 1923; Said, 1995; W. C. Smith, 1991).

Several other prominent orientalists, such as David Samuel Margoliouth, Edward Said, and Montgomery Watt, began to show fundamental sympathy for Islam and the figure of the Prophet Muhammad. The depiction shown of the figure of the Prophet Muhammad, for example, is not only based on more valid historical sources and is a reference for Muslims, but also acknowledges the qualities of the Prophet's personality, the superiority of his da'wah, his ability to carry out social transformation movements in Arab society, as well as his exemplary figure, which is inversely proportional to what has been understood by Western society. Edward Said, even gave sharp criticism of the description of Islam and the figure of the Prophet Muhammad which has been given

by many other orientalists, which according to him is full of attempts to force a Western perspective that is full of interests and inequality from the start (Said, 1995; W. C. Smith, 1991; Watt, 1961).

Second, there is an effort to reconstruct the presence of Islam in history which is also inseparable from the study of the history of the life of the Prophet Muhammad based on historical evidence and scientific sources which are more accountable to the revisionists. The emergence of a movement to study Islam through historical sources and evidence that has been tested by these revisionists, as explained by Sirry (2017), is inseparable from the notion that various historical references to Islam and the Prophet Muhammad often cannot be justified. *Sira* books or dates written by traditional Muslim historians generally reflect the history of salvation. This makes the descriptions of the Prophet in these books not describe actual events, but rather ideal images projected into the past.

The appearance of these revisionist writers in turn also adds to the long list of depictions of Islam and the Prophet Muhammad in Western society with various perspectives and claims. Some revisionist figures, such as orientalists, also present a negative image of the Prophet Muhammad, which shows that efforts to clarify Western society's view of the figure of the Prophet Muhammad following traditions recognized in the Islamic world remain a complex task. However, the appearance of the revisionists and their various works provides a diverse perspective in understanding Islam and the figure of the Prophet Muhammad which is different from the orientalists.

The results of historical studies by revisionists such as Patricia Crone (2004) or Michael Cook (1983) show that there is an attempt to reject the historical version of Muhammad's prophethood as it is known in Islamic tradition in general. Crone (2004) in this case says that the different descriptions of the biographical history of the Prophet by classical Muslim historians indicate the weakness of historical evidence used as a source for writing *tarikh* or *sirah*. Crone and Cook (1977) in *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World*, also seek to provide an alternative historical version of Islam that is very different from what is known to Muslims or historical teaching about Islam in general. The early adherents of Islam are mentioned as a form of Arab-Jewish alliance movement to seize Palestine and against the Byzantine empire. Crone and Cook also mention that Abd. Malik bin Marwan is the main character who succeeded in formulating Muslim and Islamic identities as a new form of teaching like Judaism and Christianity. In other words, the figure of Muhammad is only the figure of the Prophet who was deliberately created so Islam is considered a monotheistic teaching that is the same as the previous religion.

Such conclusions from historical studies are common descriptions from an early revisionist perspective. However, other revisionists offer a historical construction of Islam and the Prophet Muhammad which provides a new perspective in the study of Islam, the Prophet Muhammad, and encourages new developments in Islamic studies among Western academics. Fred M. Donner (2010) for example, offers a new understanding of the reconstruction of Islamic history based on the earliest source of Islam itself, namely the Qur'an. The results of his study show that Islamic teachings were originally ecumenical teachings. The followers of the Prophet Muhammad initially identified themselves as a community of believers with three main characteristics, namely believing in one God, believing in the Last Day, and doing good. Anyone who accepts these three principles is considered as one line or part of this community of believers, even if their religion is Judaism or Christianity.

The offer of the results of historical studies by the revisionists regarding the figure of the Prophet Muhammad himself, which is included in their various works, actually provides a new way of reading the history of Muhammad's prophethood (Al-Karaki, 2022; Ashour, 2008; Erman, 2022; Kidwa, 2019; Simons, 2019; Voort, 2021). The historical criticism offered by these revisionists provides important ideas for the development of a new historical perspective on the Prophet Muhammad, not only in Western society but also in Muslim society as a whole. However, the various new perspectives offered regarding the reading of the historical figure of the Prophet Muhammad, of course, do not necessarily get a positive response from the Muslims themselves. There have been many rejections of new discourses related to Islamic studies and the history of the Prophet, but they have not been accompanied by real work from Muslim academics to counterbalance the discourses of these revisionists.

Karen Armstrong's Sympathetic Description of the Prophet Muhammad

Various attempts to introduce and explain Islam and the historical descriptions of the Prophet Muhammad to Western society, both those carried out by orientalists and previous revisionists, must admit that they have emphasized existing prejudices. Ironically, this condition was then coupled with the apologetic attitude of Muslims, the classic tendency to reject any form of an offer from the West, to the inability to accept criticism and new academic input, all of which made efforts to reconstruct the history of the Prophet Muhammad only develop as a mere academic discourse. This kind of attitude also emphasizes the prejudices of Western society against Muslims, which are following what they have believed so far about Islam and the figure of the prophet Muhammad.

Various socio-political religious events, especially in the context of relations between Islam and the West, actually do not fully support the efforts of the writers to clarify the image of Islam and the Prophet Muhammad in Western society itself. Various cases of terror and violence in the name of Islamic teachings in several regions and communities as well, coupled with media framing have also made this effort even more difficult. Therefore, the presence of popular writers from those who have enough names and a wide audience is urgently needed to balance discourses related to Islam and the figure of the Prophet Muhammad which continues to experience agitation and degradation in Western society. In this context, the presence of Karen Armstrong and her various works, especially those discussing Islam and the figure of the Prophet Muhammad, are important to read.

Armstrong himself emphasized that one of his works, entitled *Muhammad, A Prophet for Our Time* (2006), was born from his embarrassment at the bad image of Islam and the fact that Islam and the figure of the Prophet Muhammad were misunderstood by Western society. Various negative prejudices, misinformation in describing the figure of the Prophet Muhammad, to the proliferation of Islamophobia in Western society, not only perpetuate the enmity and hatred that once existed between each side but also provide a basis for religious extremists to carry out various acts of terror as well as prove that Islam and the West cannot be reconciled. Armstrong (2006) states:

We can no longer afford to indulge this type of bigotry because it is a gift to extremists who can use such statements to "prove" that the Western world is indeed engaged in a new crusade against the Islamic world. Muhammad was not a man of violence. We must approach his life in a balanced way, in order to appreciate his considerable achievements. To cultivate inaccurate prejudice damages the tolerance, liberality, and compassion that is supposed to characterize Western culture (Armstrong, 2006).

Armstrong's intention to clarify the views and understanding of Western society about Islam and the figure of the Prophet Muhammad has made Armstrong known as a writer who is quite sympathetic to Islam. Armstrong (2006) does not even hesitate to say that Muhammad was a very humane Prophet. Instead of being a figure who inspired war and violence, the Prophet Muhammad was described by Armstrong as a person who never committed violence. Armstrong, in his book also reviews a biography of the Prophet by focusing on important topics that are considered to be able to clear up misunderstandings about Islam and the figure of the Prophet Muhammad, including *Mecca, Jahiliyyah, Hijrah, Jihad, and Salam*.

Through a poetic style of speech that makes the reader feel comfortable reading her book, Armstrong seeks to build the figure of the Prophet as an ideal role model, by emphasizing the meaning of *jihad* and Islam as a greeting religion that is far from understanding Western society so far. For her, *jihad* is an earnest attempt to build a life, not a battle cry against enemies or destroying common life. Armstrong wrote:

His life was a jihad: as we shall see, this word does not mean "holy war," it means "struggle." Muhammad literally sweated with the effort to bring peace to war-torn Arabia, and we need people who are prepared to do this today. His life was a tireless campaign against greed, injustice, and arrogance. He realized that Arabia was at a turning point and that the old way of thinking would no longer suffice, so he wore himself out in the creative effort to evolve an

entirely new solution. We entered another era of history on September 11, and must strive with equal intensity to develop a different outlook (Armstrong, 2006, p. 19).

Armstrong also does not just try to clarify the meaning of *jihad*, but also adds that the teaching of *jihad* is an obligation for Muslims in all areas of life. Because the Prophet Muhammad taught that the main practice of *jihad* is to fight oneself, fight one's desires, fight self-loathing, and have a positive attitude to build and change one's life. Armstrong wrote:

Muhammad was not a pacifist. He believed that warfare was sometimes inevitable and even necessary. After the battle of Badr, the Muslims knew that it was only a matter of time before Mecca took her revenge, and they dedicated themselves to a long, grueling *jihad*. But the primary meaning of that word, which we hear so often today, is not "holy war" but the "effort" or "struggle" necessary to put the will of God into practice. Muslims are exhorted to strive in this endeavor on all fronts: intellectual, social, economic, spiritual, and domestic. Sometimes they would have to fight, but this was not their chief duty. On their way home from Badr, Muhammad uttered an important and oft-quoted maxim: "We are returning from the Lesser Jihad (the battle) and going to the Greater Jihad,"—the immeasurably more important and difficult struggle to reform their own society and their own hearts (Armstrong, 2006, p. 131).

What Armstrong wants to convey is that if there are terrorists who speak in the name of Islam or the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, it is certain that the perpetrators did not understand the true message of the Prophet. If one studies the historical biography of the Prophet Muhammad in-depth, then instead of finding a figure who likes and advocates for war, has a haughty and arrogant attitude, or has a deep hatred of opponents, one will instead find a humanist figure who is not only necessary for the Arab society—who was fond of belligerence—at that time, but also appropriate for today's society.

Even though Armstrong did not embrace Islam, Armstrong in his description looks very sympathetic and has great admiration for the figure of the Prophet Muhammad. This reason also makes Armstrong's works acceptable to not only Western society but also Muslim readers who want to see the perspective of non-Muslim Western writers regarding the Prophet Muhammad. A small note on this matter is that even though there have been many biographical works about the Prophet written by even popular writers like Armstrong, this does not necessarily eliminate the negative assumptions of Western society about Islam or the figure of the Prophet Muhammad as the messenger of Islamic teachings.

Armstrong in this regard emphasized that what is more important than reading this biography of the Prophet is emulating the behavior of the Prophet Muhammad himself. Because Western society's assessment of Islam and the figure of the Prophet Muhammad will focus on the behavior of Muslims as his followers. If today's Muslims are lagging behind the West, then the attitude and sincerity of Muslims to catch up without losing their identity become an important *jihad* that must be carried out, just as the Prophet Muhammad succeeded in fighting *jahiliyah* (ignorance) in Arab society. At the end of the Prophet's biography he wrote, Armstrong, by quoting Wilfred Cantwell Smith, provides the following important notes:

... functioning Islam had for centuries helped Muslims cultivate decent values which we in the West share because they spring from a common tradition. Some Muslims have problems with Western modernity. They have turned against the cultures of the People of the Book, and have even begun to Islamize their new hatred of these sister faiths, which were so powerfully endorsed by the Qur'an. Cantwell Smith argued that if they are to meet the challenge of the day, Muslims must learn to understand our Western traditions and institutions, because they are not going to disappear. If Islamic societies did not do this, he maintained, they would fail the test of the twentieth century. But he pointed out that Western people also have a problem: "an inability to recognize that they share the planet not with inferiors but with equals (Armstrong, 2006, p. 213).

Armstrong realizes that the mistakes of Western society in understanding the figure of the Prophet Muhammad often originate from the behavior of the Muslim community itself, which is then propagated by the media and certain parties as if religion (Islam) is a source of violence. Muslims must realize that they live in a diverse world, not only Muslims. Therefore, apart from being understood, they must also be able to understand other values and cultures outside of themselves. In an interview with Lisette Thooft (2015) published in *Nieuw Wij* (18 January 2015), when asked whether there was a difference between the figures of Jesus and Muhammad in terms of violence, Armstrong answered emphatically:

Terrorism has nothing to do with Muhammad, any more than the Crusades had anything to do with Jesus. There is nothing in Islam that is more violent than Christianity. All religions have been violent, including Christianity. There was nothing in the Muslim world like antisemitism: that is an import of the modern period. They got it from us. The missionaries brought it over. And then came the state of Israel. Judaism has become violent in the modern world, thanks to the nation-state (Thooft, 2015).

Armstrong could be right that any religion wants and teaches kindness to its adherents. Therefore, if there is violence, terror, or war in the name of religion, then this may not be because of religious teachings, but rather the inability of humans to fight against themselves.

5. Conclusions

The results of this brief study show two important things: *First*, there is a dynamic dialectic in the description and depiction of the figure of the Prophet Muhammad from Western writers, both from orientalist writers, such as W. Montgomery Watt, David Samuel Margoliouth, Edward Said, revisionist writers such as Patricia Crone, Michael Cook, Fred M. Donner, as well as popular writers like Karen Armstrong. This dynamic shows that the effort to understand the figure of the Prophet Muhammad is an important effort to understand and understand Islam to Western society. *Second*, Armstrong's description as the author of popular religious studies books about the figure of the Prophet Muhammad shows sympathy and respect for the figure of the Prophet Muhammad. This also makes Armstrong's work acceptable not only to Western society but also to Muslim readers who wish to see the perspective of non-Muslim Western writers regarding the Prophet Muhammad. Armstrong's work has more or less contributed to reducing various misunderstandings about Islam and the figure of the Prophet Muhammad in Western society.

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