

## A Critical Study of Armstrong's View on Myth in the Qur'ān with an Emphasis on the Phenomenological Approach

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### Abstract

Myth in the Quran is one of the topics that has been studied by western Qur'ānic scholars. The new studies of Western scholars have investigated this issue with different approaches and methods, sometimes with a contextual approach and sometimes with a phenomenological approach. In the meantime, Karen Armstrong, using the principles and characteristics of the phenomenological approach, has studied the myth in religions, especially in Islam and the Qur'ān. She considers all the events mentioned in the holy books of the three Abrahamic monotheistic religions to be myths, although there may be historical events behind them, but over centuries this historical event has become the source of religious inspiration and the center of religious spirituality. To transform and enter the lives and hearts of believing and worshiping generations, it must be recreated in the form of a myth along with actions and rituals. Karen Armstrong is a British author and commentator who has written many works in the field of Islam and the Quran. The comparative and phenomenological approach to religion is one of the main characteristics of her works. Like other mythologists, she introduces myth as an event that once happened in some way, but at the same time always happens.

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According to her, an event should be freed from the shackles of a certain period and enter the lives of contemporary worshipers, because otherwise it will remain a unique and unrepeatable event, or a strange historical event that does not connect with the lives of others. In other words, the key point of the view of this group of orientalist about the relationship between myth and historical event can be summarized in the following sentence: "As long as a historical event has not become a myth, it cannot become a source of religious inspiration." As the title and content of this research indicate, the subject matter pertains to Karen Armstrong's phenomenological approach to Quranic narratives and their relationship to the concept of myth. The research aims to not only compare her perspective with the methodological principles of phenomenology but also to critically evaluate it. Previous studies on this topic can be broadly divided into two categories: Western studies on myth in the Quran and Islamic studies that critique Western scholars' views on this issue. The research in the first category constitutes the primary sources for this research, along with other critical studies among the various critiques offered by Muslim scholars; the contextual approach employed by Western scholars has received particular attention. This approach has been extensively discussed by scholars such as Angelika Neuwirth in the Encyclopedia of the Quran. In response, several articles have been written critiquing and examining this perspective. But the analysis of Armstrong's point of view based on phenomenological approach is a subject that has been rarely discussed and this research can be considered one of the initial critical studies in this regard. In contrast to Western scholars, Muslim scholars and exegetes have primarily focused on the concept of "Asāṭīr al-Awwalīn" (اساطير الاولين) when addressing the issue of myth in the Quran. They have sought to explain this concept within the Quranic framework. The majority of Muslim exegetes define Asāṭīr as the writings of the ancients about their own lives, including their history, speeches, stories, and events. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1209 CE) identifies this definition as the view held by the majority of exegetes. However, what is studied under the title of myth in the

western Qur'ānic studies has other criteria and indicators that are determined by contextual and phenomenological approaches. Using library sources and descriptive-analytical method, this article aims to examine Armstrong's view of myth in the Quran by emphasizing the methodological principles of the phenomenological approach and evaluate it in the form of a case study. The principle of autonomy or independence, which expresses the uniqueness of the realm of the sacred and its experience, is one of the most important methodological principles of the phenomenological approach. Emphasizing this principle, Armstrong considers the language and realm of the Qur'ān to be different from the language and realm of experimental and social affairs, and this is where she finds her way to mythological or symbolic language. Relying on the comparative method, which is one of the methodological principles of the phenomenological approach, Armstrong compares Islam and Christianity and, in this way, pays attention to the character of Jesus and the mythological issues created by Paul. She tries to present a view similar to her own view of Christianity by presenting three introductions: The Prophet being the successor of Christ, the Qur'ān's non-opposition to myth and the moral function of the stories of the Qur'ān. In this way, the Quran, by presenting a mythological image of the Prophet of Islam and other prophets, tries to bring these characters out of the confinement of those times and places and repeat them for all ages. In addition to the criticisms that were expressed regarding the symbolic nature of the language of the Quran and the effectiveness of a belief in the lives of believers as a criterion of truth, Armstrong's comparison between the Prophet of Islam and the Jesus has been criticized.

**Keywords:** Qur'ān, Myth, Armstrong, Phenomenology, Idea of the Holy.

## **Introduction**

The sacred texts of religions have always included many historical statements that tell about past nations and events. The Qur'ān, like other sacred texts, is full of stories and historical reports. However, since the very beginning of Islam, disputes and doubts about these statements have been raised by opponents, to the extent that the Qur'ān itself has repeatedly pointed out these differences and denied the mythologizing of historical reports. (Q. 6:25; 8: 31)

The new studies of Western scholars have investigated this issue with different approaches and methods, sometimes with a contextual approach and sometimes with a phenomenological approach. In the meantime, Karen Armstrong, using the principles and characteristics of the phenomenological approach, has studied the myth in religions, especially in Islam and the Qur'ān. She considers all the events mentioned in the holy books of the three Abrahamic monotheistic religions to be myths, although there may be historical events behind them, but over centuries this historical event has become the source of religious inspiration and the center of religious spirituality. To transform and enter the lives and hearts of believing and worshiping generations, it must be recreated in the form of a myth along with actions and rituals.

Karen Armstrong is a British author and commentator who has written many works in the field of Islam and the Quran. The comparative and phenomenological approach to religion is one of the main characteristics of her works. (Britannica) like other mythologists, she introduces myth as an event that once happened in some way, but at the same time always happens. According to her, an event should be freed from the shackles of a certain period and enter the lives of contemporary worshipers, because otherwise it will remain a unique and unrepeatable event, or a strange historical event that does not connect with the lives of others. In other words, the key point of the view of this group of orientalists about the relationship between myth and historical event can be summarized in the following sentence: "As long as a historical event has not become a myth, it cannot become a

source of religious inspiration." (Armstrong 2005, 1-3)

As the title and content of this research indicate, the subject matter pertains to Karen Armstrong's phenomenological approach to Quranic narratives and their relationship to the concept of myth. The research aims to not only compare her perspective with the methodological principles of phenomenology but also to critically evaluate it.

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Using library sources and descriptive-analytical method, this article aims to examine Armstrong's view of myth in the Quran by emphasizing the methodological principles of the phenomenological

approach and evaluate it in the form of a case study.

### **1. Phenomenological Approach: Principles and Methodological Characteristics**

Phenomenology is considered both as a scientific discipline or a current in philosophy and its history and as a method for research in various fields, and this is because phenomenology in the field of religion and religious studies with phenomenology in philosophy is different (Smith, 2018). In the phenomenology of religion, the methodological approach has a higher position than theoretical issues, and researchers in this field emphasize more on methodological principles. Therefore, knowing the methodological principles emphasized and confirmed by phenomenology in the field of religion is the first and most important step in introducing this methodological approach.

### **2. Autonomy or Independence**

The first methodological principle of phenomenology of religion is the distinction between religious phenomena and other phenomena. This principle holds that the nature of religious phenomena is distinct and different from other phenomena. According to this principle, the Idea of the Holy and its experience, which is completely unique and transcendent, forms the main essence of religious phenomena. The realm and experience of the sacred is different from other realms and human experiences, and this distinction makes it impossible to describe this realm and experience in the form of conventional concepts, literature, and methods in experimental and social sciences. Therefore, the sacred appears mysterious, symbolic, and mythological. Conventional scientific and experimental approaches cannot be used to study and understand it. Instead, we must seek a method that can recognize and decode the symbolic and mysterious nature of religious language, as well as religious symbols and myths. This methodological principle in the phenomenology of religion emphasizes that religion can only be known and understood if it is studied in its own realm and level, namely as a religious and holy

matter. Religious phenomena should never be reduced to other phenomena such as economic, social, and psychological phenomena. In other words, religion and its phenomena must be understood as they are manifested in the experience of believers and religious people (Eliade 1987, 277).

### **3. Comparative Study**

Comparative and systematic approach is another methodological principle of phenomenology in the field of religion. This means that in order to understand religious phenomena as well as possible, one should take a comparative and systematic look at the history of life and human societies from the beginning until now, and by examining the characteristics of each group and society at any time and place, find out the religious patterns of each; by putting these patterns together and deciphering them, achieving fundamental and common structures that form the basis and essence of religious realities.

For example, the moon, sun, water, earth, and plants are symbols and patterns that exist in all religious societies, regardless of whether they are agricultural, hunting, or otherwise; by ignoring the symbolic manifestations of these symbols and patterns, one can arrive at the underlying structures and essence that are common to all religious societies. On the other hand, phenomenologists of religion believe that symbols and myths rarely exist in isolation. They often have a structured and systematic character. Each symbol is actually part of a larger world of symbols, and in this way, they create systematic and regular patterns that unify all the seemingly chaotic and diverse aspects of the human world (Pals 2003, 257-258).

### **4. Historical Studies**

The empirical and historical approach is another methodological principle in the phenomenology of religion. Collecting religious data from various historical societies is the first step in the phenomenological method of religion. Therefore, the phenomenology of religion has a deep and inseparable connection with the history of religions and its evolution. The phenomenological analysis of the

collected data and the decoding of hidden symbols and myths in these data is the next step in this method, as most phenomenologists believe that the results obtained from this analysis are empirical and inductive rather than theoretical and inferential (Eliade 1987, 280).

### **5. Characteristics of Myth in Armstrong's View**

Armstrong utilizes the methodological characteristics of the phenomenological approach to conduct a comparative and historical study of this topic in different historical periods. She aims to identify the important and fundamental characteristics of myth. Therefore, the first step in understanding myth in Armstrong's view is to recognize its characteristics.

#### **5.1. Rooted in the Experience of Death**

Armstrong identifies the first characteristic of myth as its rootedness in the experience of death and the fear of annihilation. She believes that myths and the rituals associated with them helped people in the Paleolithic era to transition from one stage of life to another. This transition was such that when death finally came, it was seen as a kind of final initiation into an unknown mode of being. (Armstrong 2005, 3)

#### **5.2. Myth and Ritual**

According to Armstrong's view, myth is not a story that can be retold in an ordinary form. Because the myth is the carrier of sacred knowledge, it is always narrated in a ritual context, which separates it from the usual common experience, and its understanding is possible only in the context of spiritual and psychological evolution. Rituals in myth remove the barriers between the listener and the story and help the listener to make the story his own. In other words, a myth without rituals is an incomplete myth.

#### **5.3. Being Instructive and Admonishing**

Another characteristic of a myth is that it is instructive and admonishing and includes lessons and examples. After the mythology



of the Paleolithic era and referring to the myths of ascension and hero, Armstrong has paid attention to the fact that behind these myths there are lofty goals that forced men and women to face the inescapable facts of life and death.

#### **5.4. Paying Attention to an Invisible Reality**

Another characteristic that Armstrong identifies for myth is its attention to another level of reality that exists alongside our own world and in some way supports it. In other words, belief in an unseen but more powerful reality is one of the main and fundamental themes of mythology (Armstrong 2005, 2-3). Mythologists have interpreted this invisible reality as "Perennial Philosophy" because it inspired myths and rituals before the advent of scientific modernity. According to the perennial philosophy, everything seen and heard on earth has a counterpart in the heavenly realm that is richer, stronger, and more enduring than its earthly counterpart, and that every earthly reality is only a pale shadow of its archetype and an imperfect version of that original ideal. So here the role of myths becomes clear, because myths help to explain this heavenly realm and the origins and ends that are lost in the misty space of prehistory and after death, and they show that there is something more than the material and visible world (Eliade 1986, 20-25).

In his book *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, Mircea Eliade, after referring to the eternal archetypes of earthly phenomena, also considers religious and ritual activities to be repetitions of the eternal archetypes of creation. He sees the rituals of sacrifice, the building of temples, and even the establishment of new cities and settlements as nothing more than imitations of the act of creation (Eliade 1965, 25).

#### **5.5. Myth and Reality**

Another characteristic that can be seen in Armstrong's phenomenological approach to myth is the discussion of the reality or unreality of historical statements in the Quran and other sacred texts. In her view, myth has reality and truth, and this reality is not because it provides us with factual information. Rather, myth has truth because

it is effective. According to this view, in mythology, we propose a hypothesis about the obscure aspects of life and give it life by using ritual. We then enact it and reflect on its effects on our lives. We find that we have gained new insights into the disturbing mystery of our world. Armstrong considers a myth to be valid if it has an effect on the minds and lives of people, inspires new hope in them, and leads them to a more fruitful life.

She considers myth as essentially a guide, acting on whose guidance leads to a richer life. On the other hand, she believes that if we do not apply it in its specific context and do not turn myth into a reality in life, it will be confusing and boring. Mythologists believe that myth not only helped people to give meaning to their lives, but also revealed areas of the human mind that would otherwise be inaccessible (Armstrong 2005, 7). Mircea Eliade believed that a historical report or event can only be considered true and real if it repeats and imitates an eternal archetype. He argued that reality is only achieved through repetition, and that anything lacking an archetypal pattern is meaningless and unreal. This tendency to repeat and follow archetypes and primordial patterns seems to be inherent in the human psyche. This is why myth is often called a primitive form of psychology. People like Carl Jung have also explained myths based on the human psyche and the collective unconscious (Eliade 1986, 60).

#### **6. Armstrong and the Phenomenological Approach to Myth**

Using the phenomenological method and approach and its methodological principles, Armstrong investigated the Qur'ān and studied the historical events reported in it. As stated, one of the methodological principles in the phenomenological approach is the use of history and the collection of historical data from early societies until now, and after that, the systematic and comparative study of these data and reaching a specific pattern. By following this path, Armstrong also tries to provide a phenomenological explanation of the myth in the Qur'ān. In this way, after explaining the place of myth in the Paleolithic Period, Neolithic Period, early civilizations and the

Axial Age, which includes from 20000 BC to 200 BC, she enters to The Post-Axial era, which is from about 200 BC to 1500 AD. She believes that after the Axial Age for more than a thousand years, there was no significant change in the concept of myth, and until the sixth century AD, the status of myth basically remained as it was, and people continued to rely on the vision of sages and philosophers of the pivotal period regarding spiritual and religious issues. In fact, Armstrong returns the new concept of myth to the 6th and 7th centuries and the Late Antiquity period. She pays attention to the difference between the three Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) and other important religious traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism. She believes that these three Abrahamic and monotheistic religions, unlike other religious traditions, claim that they are not based on myth but on history. She says that unlike other ancient religions and traditions, Jews, Christians and Muslims believe that their God is active in history and can be experienced in real events in this world. After stating this, she raises the question whether these events really happen or are they myths? (Armstrong 2019)

As an example, she considered Judaism's confrontation with the mythology of other nations to be contradictory and believes that Judaism sometimes reject them and sometimes use these foreign myths to explain its view. In the phenomenological explanation of the confrontation of the Jewish scriptures with ancient myths, Armstrong pays attention to the Neolithic Age and the invention of agriculture in this period, and believes that just as hunting was considered sacred in the Paleolithic Age, agriculture was sacred in the Neolithic Age and it was accompanied by a mythical interpretations and a ritual. In the early Neolithic myths, harvest was the result of a kind of hierogram or sacred marriage (Armstrong 2010, 31). Biblical reports and narratives show that these orgy or ritual sexual relations in ancient Israel, angered the prophets such as Hosea (Hosea 4:11-19) and Ezekiel (Ezekiel 8:2) 18) and It was done until the 6th century BC. Even in the temple of Jerusalem and a house belonging to the sacred prostitution, rituals were held in honor of Asherah, the fertility goddess of Canaan

(2 Kings 23:4-7).

Armstrong believes that although the prophets of Israel felt that they had to fight hard with the old myths that were not compatible with the reforms of the central era, but when it was necessary, they used the ancient god of the Middle Eastern myth. She recounts the story of crossing the Red Sea in the book of Exodus (Exodus 14) exactly according to the description of ancient myths (Armstrong 2011, 67-69).

Armstrong believes that although the religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam are historical religions, they have specific and wide mythological dimensions and to explain these mythological dimensions, they had no choice but to use the myth. She believes that these three religions contain mysteries that leave no choice but to resort to myths. She considered the use of myths by Abrahamic religions in the two fields of Divine texts and mysticism, and she believes that myths have entered seriously in both fields (Armstrong 2006, 360-366).

### **7. Armstrong's Phenomenological Reading of Myth in the Qur'ān**

As stated, the phenomenological approach, after collecting historical data and analyzing and examining these data, tries to provide specific interpretive codes and a common and systematic pattern. Using this approach, Armstrong believes that the Quran is a book full of myths and this book, contrary to what believers think, has no problem with myths. She calls all the stories of the Qur'ān about prophets like Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus as signs, parables, similitudes. She sees the language of these stories as signs and symbols because they talk about the idea of the holy. Therefore, in her opinion, not only is the Qur'ān full of myths, but it has no choice but to resort to myths and its language. In proving her claim, using the methodological principles of phenomenology based on a comparative and systematic approach, she conducted a comparative study between Islam and Christianity and tried to find common codes and exemplary models between these two religions. In addition, by emphasizing the feature of the Quran based on recitation in mosques and Muslim

gatherings, she has tried to show the ritual characteristics and the presence of myths among believers in the Quran (Armstrong 2011, 77).

### **8. Comparative Study of Islam and Christianity (Quran and Bible)**

One of the methodological principles of phenomenologists in religious studies is to use the comparative approach between religions. Following this principle, Armstrong considered Islam to be another reading of Christianity and compared these two religions. The comparison between Jesus and Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is one of her most important comparative studies in this regard.

Armstrong's first step in implementing her view of mythology in Islam is to read Islam as another reading of Christianity. She considered Christianity as one of the recent rewritings of Axial Age monotheism, the other version of which is Islam. What can be seen in the initial study of the beliefs, rituals and ideas of the three Abrahamic religions is the commonality of these three religions in monotheism and some of the historical statements and beliefs that result from the single and common source of these religions. Islam also considers itself as a religion on the path of previous monotheistic religions, which is the final and complementary religion of them. Therefore, Islam can be considered as a new reading of Christianity and Judaism, which takes on the roles of confirmation, supplementation, correction and denial depending on the teachings and ideas of these religions. Another interpretation of this view is the phenomenological reading of the existence of similarities between Islam and Christianity and that these similarities are caused by common exemplary patterns that existed and still exist in history; In other words, Islam and Christianity are both readings of the Axial Age's monotheism, which shows an inner tendency towards a supreme and unique God, and this tendency has occurred once in the form of Christianity and again in the form of Islam.

### **9. Mythical Interpretation of Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) Following Jesus' Mythologization**

The comparison of the Prophet of Islam with the main figures of other religions is one of the characteristics of the western Quranic studies. This comparison is especially evident in the phenomenological approach, whose methodological principles are based on comparison. In this way, Armstrong introduced Jesus as one of the most important religious myths and claims that by reading Jesus as a myth, she is not trying to create a negative attribute for him, but despite the fact that she considers Jesus Christ to be a real historical person who died around 30 AD., but it is believed that he was turned into a mythical figure by Paul. In her opinion, what was important to Paul was the "mystery" of Jesus' death and resurrection, and he was not interested in his teachings or earthly events, and this is why he wrote in his letter to the Corinthians: "Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regarded him thus on longer." (2 Corinthians 5:16) Paul turned Jesus into a timeless and legendary hero who, after the crucifixion, ascends to a unique dignity and is resurrected in a new life, and everyone who attends the ceremony If he performs baptism, he enters the realm of Christ's death and shares in his new life. Such a mythical redefinition of Christ by Paul places the historical figure of Jesus in the shadow of his mythical figure, which becomes a spiritual reality in the lives of Christians with the help of ritual and moral principles. Christians no longer know him historically and physically, but they encounter him in the form of other human beings, in the study of the Bible and in the Eucharist (Luke 24:13-22). Armstrong believes that Christians know this myth to be true, not because of the historical evidence available, but because they have experienced the transformation. Finally, she says:

"Therefore, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ was a myth; this story once happened to Jesus Christ and now it always happens." (Armstrong, 2005, 42)

Immediately after speaking about the mythical face of Christ and Paul's role in it, she refers to the Prophet Muhammad and says:

“Muslims regard the Prophet Muhammad (c. 570–632 CE) as the successor of the biblical prophets and of Jesus. The Koran, the scripture that he brought to the Arabs, had no problem with myth. Every single one of its verses is called an ayah, a parable. All the stories about the prophets – Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses or Jesus – are āyāt, ‘parables, similitudes’, because we can only speak about the divine in terms of signs and symbols. The Arabic word Qur’ān means ‘recitation’. The scripture is not to be perused privately for information, like a secular manual, but recited in the sacred context of the mosque, and it will not reveal its full significance unless a Muslim life according to its ethical precepts.”

What stands out here is Armstrong's presentation of Prophet Muhammad, Islam, and the Qur’ān. After explaining the face made of Jesus by Paul, which is rightly a mythical face, and also matching this face with her own definition of myth, without explicitly mentioning the mythical face of the prophet; by arranging some topics about Islam, it seems that she seeks to instill such a definition and a mythical figure for the Prophet of Islam. First, she pays attention to the point that according to the Muslim belief, Prophet Muhammad is the successor of Jesus Christ, so he must continue or complete the same path and face of Christianity. After that, she refers to the Qur’ān and draws attention to the fact that the Qur’ān has no problem with myths and all the stories of the prophets mentioned in this book are myths presented in the language of signs and symbols. Finally, she points to the moral function of these stories or to her interpretation of the myths mentioned in the Qur’ān, which expresses her definition of myths that refer to entering the lives and souls of humans and worshipers. It seems that she is trying to present a scenario similar to the scenario of Christianity about Islam by stating these three introductions: The Prophet Mohammad (s) being the successor of Christ, the Quran not contradicting the myth and the moral function of the stories of the Quran. In other words, the reality of the stories mentioned in the Qur’ān about the Prophet of Islam and other prophets is not because of their historical evidence, but because of the impact and transformation that they leave in the lives of Muslims always and every day. She

believes in the historical truth of the existence of the Prophet, like Jesus, and she believes that the Prophet lived in the sixth and seventh centuries AD and a group of people believed in it. But this character has become a timeless myth due to the Quran and the narrations mentioned about him. As stated, Armstrong considers the association of the myth with ritual and moral principles and belief among the worshipers as a condition for the spiritual truth of that myth and its effect on people's lives, and she explained these principles and conditions in detail about the mythical figure of Christ. However, in the case of the Prophet and the Qur'ān, she has not been mentioned as well as in the case of Jesus.

In criticizing Armstrong's point of view in this regard, it is necessary to pay attention to the fact that if Armstrong found a figure like Paul in the history of Islam, to whom the mythologizing of the Prophet's face could be attributed, she would have mentioned it. Or if she could write a scenario that separates the historical reality of the Prophet's life from his mythical face, as she did about the life and character of Jesus, she would have specified it. But after describing in detail the mythical figure of Jesus and Paul's role in it, by simply putting pieces together; it seems that she has led the reader to believe that the story in Islam is the same as in Christianity.

However, in the case of the Prophet of Islam, two distinct figures (historical and mythical) cannot be recognized and separated from each other, as is the case in Christianity. Because from the very beginning, Christianity witnessed many differences about the nature and personality of Christ, and some considered Christ to be human, some considered God, and some considered him to have two natures, so that church councils tried to reduce these differences by issuing resolutions (Nass 2006, 634). Even now, there are groups and sects among Christians, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, who, unlike Christians, consider the god-like face of Christ to have been made by Paul, and consider this to be a clear deviation in this religion, and believe that Christ was a human being has been sent by God for guidance of the community. Therefore, there has been a dispute about



the character and nature of Jesus among Christians from the very beginning.

Of course, unlike Armstrong's point of view, Christians do not consider the image made by Paul to be a deviation or a result of Paul's personal taste, but they believe that Paul discovered the truth and presented the correct interpretation of Christ and Christianity as an apostle with the grace of the Holy Spirit. This is why topics such as incarnation, atonement and the cross are among the main and consensus teachings of Christianity (Michel 1998, 66; Brantl 2002, 81). The four gospels also took a dual approach regarding the character of Christ, and therefore these gospels are divided into two categories of synoptic and non-synoptic gospels. The synoptic gospels, which include the Gospel of Matthew, the Gospel of Luke, and the Gospel of Mark, present a human-like face of Christ, and there is no trace of the divinity of Jesus (for example, Luke 24:39, Mark 8:31 and Matthew 2: 1); but the Gospel of John begins to present a different face of Christ, and this Gospel's view of Christ seems to be divine and non-human (For example, John 1:1-3; 17:5).

Therefore, unlike Christianity, in which there were many disagreements about the character of Christ and his nature from the very beginning, and the gospels also presented a dual and sometimes contradictory definition of him, in Islam, there is no difference about the personality of the Prophet, and in the history of Islam, there is no evidence of any group or sect that has claimed a god-like role for the prophet. In addition to this, the holy book of Islam has repeatedly emphasized the human nature of the Prophet and there is no contradiction or ambiguity in the nature and personality of the Prophet in the Qur'ān (for example, Q. 18:110).

#### **10. The Language of the Qur'ān: Symbolic (Mythical) or non-Symbolic?**

Armstrong interprets all the stories of the Quran about the prophets as signs, parables, or metaphors. Because they speak of the idea of the holy, their language is symbolic. In other words, she believes that speaking of the sacred is only possible through the language of

symbols, parables, and metaphors, which is the language of myth. This is why she considers the Quran to be full of myths.

The language of religion is one of the main axes in the philosophy of religion and has been the subject of a long-standing debate. This topic has been considered by philosophers and theologians from various perspectives and approaches, and has led to the emergence of various opinions and theories. Among them, some new perspectives in this field consider the language of religion to be symbolic and mythological.

Symbolic language includes various terms such as code, parable, metaphor, and myth (Vahed Doost 2020, 115). A characteristic of symbolic and coded language is that it does not directly refer to reality. In other words, beyond their spiritual, mystical, or social messages, no truth can be found, although a reality may have formed the basis of that message (Sa'eedi Roshan 2012, 14-15). According to this view, the literal and true meaning of religious reports is not intended, but rather these reports are symbols that refer to other truths.

Paul Tillich argues that it is impossible to speak about God, because God cannot be described with the predicates of our language. According to his view, religious concepts are purely subjective symbols that have no root in reality, but connect us to the sacred. In this view, symbols are the ground for our religious experience, but they do not refer to any reality in God.

Carl Gustav Jung also believes that it is necessary to use symbolic and metaphorical language due to the existence of concepts that are far beyond human understanding. He considers this language to be the main characteristic of all religions, because he believes that symbols are the best possible image for visualizing something that is relatively unknown and cannot be clearly expressed.

Mircea Eliade also considers the language of religion to be full of parables, metaphors, poetry, rituals, and silence. He believes that it is impossible to speak about the mysterious nature of ultimate reality and the sacred except through symbols, which is the language of myth.

In general, factors such as the transcendence of the idea of the

holy and the inadequacy of human language to express religious truths are the main reasons that the religious scholars have claimed that the language of the Quran and other divine text is symbolic.

Now, by expressing the views of some religious scholars about symbolic and mythological language and also the factors that have caused such views, the question arises whether the language of the Qur'ān or a part of it can be considered a symbolic and mythological language? Or what is the role of symbolic, allegorical and mythological language in conveying Quranic messages?

What is obtained in the initial examination of the view of the symbolic language of the Qur'ān is that the supporters of this view, citing the methodological principles taken from the phenomenological approach, which claims the principle of independence and differentiation of religious phenomena from other phenomena, and believes that the nature of religious phenomena is different from other phenomena, try to prove their claim. As stated, these scholars consider the Idea of the Holy and its experience as the main essence of religious phenomena and believe that the realm and experience of the Holy is different from other realms and human experiences. This distinction makes it impossible to describe this realm and experience in the form of conventional concepts, literature and methods in experimental and social sciences.

In the analysis and evaluation of this view, beyond the problems in it, which we will discuss briefly, what is certain is that the existence of sublime truths and holy things in religion and the Qur'ān, which cannot be explained by human language, is undeniable. In addition, the Quran and other religious texts use allegory, ironic language, likening the sensible to the tangible and the secondary meanings of the words to bring the human mind closer to the holy things and stories. Even beyond that, one of the features and characteristics of the Qur'ānic verses is definitive and equivocal verses, as well as the exterior and interior of the Qur'ān, which can be interpreted with the symbolic meaning of the language of the Qur'ān.

There are many differences among Muslim scholars about equivocal verses in the Qur'ān, some consider the knowledge of

equivocal verses in the Qur'ān to be exclusive to God, and others believe that although the meaning of them in the Qur'ān is complicated and ambiguous at first, it can be understood by referring to the verses He recognized them firmly (Tabātabāi 1993, 3:43). Ayatollah Ma'rifat considers the strongest reason for the necessity of the existence of the equivocal verses in the Qur'ān to be the insufficiency of words to accurately convey the Quranic concepts, and therefore the use of permitted types of metaphors and allusions is necessary. The use of metaphors, allusions, and signs in the Quran makes Quranic concepts both closer and further from the understanding of the general public. It is closer to the mind because of familiarity with the words and the casting of Quranic concepts into verbal forms, and further from the mind because of the highness of the meanings hidden in these concepts (Ma'rifat 2007, 3: 21).

In the narration of the infallible Imams, there are also references to ambiguous verses and how to deal with them. There is a narration from Imam Reza (AS) who says:

"He who refers the ambiguous Quran to its clear verses has been guided to the straight path." (Ṣadūq 2008, 1: 290)

However, if we want to extract from this rhetorical feature of the Qur'ān, other results that the statements of the Qur'ān are unreal or that they are mythical, which requires decoding and de-mythologizing, it leads to many problems and criticisms. The first objection to these inferential consequences from the symbolic language of the Qur'ān is their baseless claim which says the Qur'ānic reports are unreal. What is clear in the explanation of the language of the Qur'ān is to pay attention to the fact that the language of the Qur'ān is neither separate from religious and historical reality nor a complete reflection of it.

On the other hand, this theory is based on the assumption that we have no knowledge of the divine existence. However, the divine existence and the sacred are introduced as another essence and category in a distinct realm and domain. The consequence of such a definition is that we must have some kind of knowledge of the sacred.

Another ambiguity and problem in the symbolic language view is

that it considers human knowledge to be only obtainable through the channels of experimental knowledge. Therefore, it considers the sacred, which is beyond the reach of experimental knowledge, to be unknowable. Yes, if the principles of human knowledge are limited to experience, then the knowledge of metaphysical concepts and sacred matters is not possible for him. However, if the framework of human knowledge is considered to be beyond experience, and we consider reason and nature to be effective in this knowledge, then naturally the scope of our knowledge will expand and will also reach the sacred. Ultimately, symbolism must clarify its position vis-à-vis the reality and objectivity of religious propositions. If religious symbols have no reality beyond them and have no relation or connection with reality and truth, then this theory is a fall into the trap of subjectivism and idealism and ignores the main role of language.


### **Conclusion**

Myth in the Quran is one of the topics that has been studied by western Qur'ānic scholars with different approaches. Among them, Karen Armstrong has examined this concept in the Quran and Islam with a phenomenological approach. Although phenomenology is used both in the field of religion and philosophy, this approach emphasizes methodological principles more in the field of religion and religious studies. The principle of autonomy or independence, which expresses the uniqueness of the realm of the sacred and its experience, is one of the most important methodological principles of the phenomenological approach. Emphasizing this principle, Armstrong considers the language and realm of the Qur'ān to be different from the language and realm of experimental and social affairs, and this is where she finds her way to mythological or symbolic language. Relying on the comparative method, which is one of the methodological principles of the phenomenological approach, Armstrong compares Islam and Christianity and, in this way, pays attention to the character of Jesus and the mythological issues created by Paul. She tries to present a view similar to her own view of Christianity by presenting three introductions: The Prophet being the

successor of Christ, the Qur'ān's non-opposition to myth and the moral function of the stories of the Qur'ān. In this way, the Quran, by presenting a mythological image of the Prophet of Islam and other prophets, tries to bring these characters out of the confinement of those times and places and repeat them for all ages. In addition to the criticisms that were expressed regarding the symbolic nature of the language of the Quran and the effectiveness of a belief in the lives of believers as a criterion of truth, Armstrong's comparison between the Prophet of Islam and the Jesus has been criticized. Because the Qur'ān itself has repeatedly stated that the Prophet was human, and no report of presenting a mythical figure of him can be found in Islamic sources, however, as Armstrong has also pointed out, there have been many disagreements about the personality and nature of the Jesus from the very beginning among the Christian community and the reading of Paul is now accepted as a popular and Catholic reading among Christians.

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