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One for the Sages

Philip Novak

Department of Religion and Philosophy, Dominican University of California, philip.novak@dominican.edu

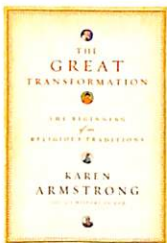
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One for the Sages



THE GREAT TRANSFORMATION The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions

By Karen Armstrong

Knopf, 2006; 496 pp.; \$30 (cloth)

REVIEWED BY PHILIP NOVAK

IN GLASS CASES OF ARCHEOLOGICAL MUSEUMS lie old stone tools that quietly testify to the emergence of human consciousness as far back as three million years ago. It is possible that we may have been religious even then, but on this point the ancient shards are mute. The oldest physical evidence we have of humankind beginning to think or act in a recognizably religious way—the graves of our Neanderthal cousins—is dateable to a mere 100,000 years ago.

So let us allow this date—100,000 years ago—to stand for the beginning of religion on planet Earth, for that will enable me to place in the boldest possible relief the historical curiosity around which this review turns. For over the next 97,000 years, religious evolution pauses. So far as we can tell from studying those cultures that afford us our deepest glimpses into the religious past, religion remains pretty much the same sort of thing everywhere, an attempt to influence unseen powers to better survive and prosper in a dicey world. Over these millennia the stories told by countless generations of tribal elders picture life as pervaded by the spirits of once-living ancestors and other invisible forces that could as easily help us as hurt us. Religion was the art of communicating with these powers through sacrifice and other rituals to enlist their aid in the maintenance of good fortune and the prevention of disaster and distress.

But suddenly—for that is how it seems in the big picture—about 3,000 years ago, something extraordinary began to happen. It would have been momentous had it happened just once, but the astonishing thing is that it seems to have happened multiple times in widely distant places with little or no cross-fertilization. The result was that within less than a millennium, and across a wide swath of Earth, the nature of religion was irreversibly altered.

It is not that the old religious mentality disappeared; in fact, it is still widespread today. Rather, a new mode of relationship to the sacred made its world-historical appearance in the most sensitive minds of the times, and it carved out a permanent niche in the collective human psyche. Impressing the German philosopher and historian Karl Jaspers as nothing less than a mutation of human consciousness that initiated a new phase in cultural evolution, he dubbed these years, roughly 900–200 BCE, the Axial Age.¹



The Tree of Paradise, by Seraphine de Senlis, circa 1929.

The seeds of this age were sown as many as seven millennia earlier with the discovery of agriculture. This innovation, in leading to larger populations, slowly eroded the old tribal ways and led inexorably to more individualized modes of consciousness. Now, after a long gestation, they were ready to bloom in places as different and distant from one another as China, India, ancient Israel, and Greece.

In India during this period, Hindu *rishis* (seers) formulated the revolutionary ideas of the *Upanishads*, disclosing spiritual vistas unknown to the sacrificial cultists of the earlier Vedas. The Buddha set his wheel of dharma rolling across the earth to unshackle human beings from craving, aversion, and the false self.

1. Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 1-21.

And the great inner warrior, Mahavira, founded the way of the self-conquerors, Jainism, a profound spiritual orientation that still today guides four million souls.

In China, this period gave birth to Confucius and Meng Ti (Mencius), and to Chuangzi and Laozi, respectively the progenitors of Confucianism and Taoism. These religio-philosophical orientations have profoundly shaped the mind of China—a fifth of the world’s population—for over 2,500 years.

In Greece, the Axial Age encompassed the careers of the philosophers Parmenides, Heraclitus, Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, and Zeno, and the great tragedians, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides.

And in Israel, it was the time of the classical Jewish prophets—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, Amos, Ezekiel—in whose minds and hearts the monolatry and tribal ethos of the earlier Israelite centuries began to be superseded by a more mature and universalist ethical monotheism. Jesus (0–30 CE) and Muhammad (570–632 CE) fall outside the technical boundaries of the Axial Age² but can be considered as secondary and tertiary flowerings of Israel’s, for notwithstanding their individual charisma, their theological and ethical visions were fully prefigured by the Jewish prophets.


These and other Axial Age mystics, philosophers, prophets, and poets formulated ideas and practices that, in departing decisively from those of our tribal past, shaped the fundamental spiritual grammar through which future generations expressed their highest aspirations, and the horizon of spiritual possibilities mapped

out by the Axial Age sages is still ours today. Through them, arguably for the first time, humanity became conscious of Being as a whole, laid itself under the categorical imperative of the Golden Rule, and aspired to a previously unknown universalism.

The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions is Karen Armstrong’s³ new 400-page study of the Axial Age and its relevance for our times. The first of the book’s ten chapters surveys life and thought in Greece, Israel, India, and China prior to 900 BCE. Each of the next eight chapters covers approximately a century of the following period, surveying the religious, political, and social histories of all four of these geographical areas. It’s an organizational strategy, which, though following logically from the die cast in the opening chapter, seemed to this reader less than optimally coherent. The book’s final chapter, “The Way Forward,” discusses the contemporary relevance of the Axial Age. It is here that Armstrong, well aware of how religion today is seen as part of the problem, suggests that a fresh appreciation of Axial Age spiritual genius can help us make religion part of the solution.

2. The Axial Age is said to have ended around 200 BCE because that is when the relatively small, independent political entities common to the era began to be absorbed into empires, which, it is surmised, had a chilling effect on the Age’s intellectual ferment.

3. Karen Armstrong is an Englishwoman and former Catholic nun who has become one of our era’s most prolific writers on the religions of the world in books like *A History of God, Muhammad, The Battle for God, and Buddha*. She resides in London.

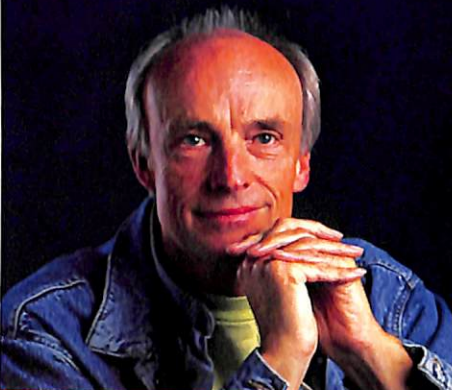


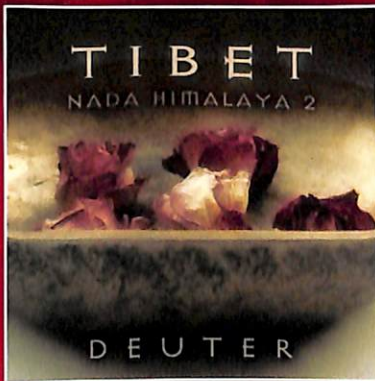
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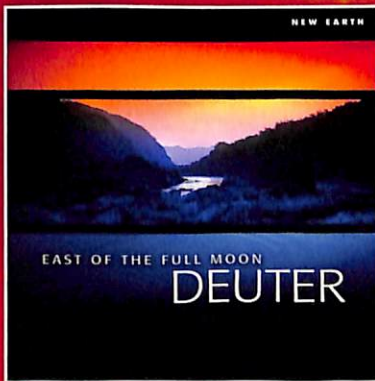




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On prominent display in this book are Armstrong's usual virtues—wide knowledge, meticulous research, a superb appreciation for the beauty and power of religious and philosophical ideals, and general readability. Her narrative powers do fluctuate a bit, though. In matters Indian and Greek, Armstrong seems at her best. Her treatment of China is at least serviceable and sometimes lyrical. Ancient Israel, however, presents a problem. She clearly admires the Hebrew prophets and sensitively celebrates their insights. Yet their social and political backdrops remains consistently out of focus, probably because the actual historical data with which Armstrong had to work remain excessively murky.

But the book delights far more often than it disappoints. Armstrong provides readers with vivid and penetrating sketches of great figures like Confucius, the Buddha, Chuangzi, Jeremiah, and Socrates, and of classic texts like the *Bhagavad Gita*. Also arresting and memorable are her revealing portrait of the growing reaction against ritual animal slaughter in late Vedic India, her masterful genealogy of the Greek gods, her vivid evocation of the Greek sense of the uncanny and tragic, her trenchant analysis of the influential Samkhya philosophical system of ancient India, and her instructive appreciation of secondary figures such as Mo Ti, the Chinese philosopher of “universal love,” and Xunzi, an important Confucian thinker with a knack for philosophical synthesis. And this is but the tip of the iceberg. For those who lack time for the extensive education Armstrong's eight-century survey provides, the book's first and last chapters will serve as a satisfying executive summary.

It is also worth noting that the book's title—*The Great Transformation*—must be taken with a grain of salt. The Axial period was not, alas, the prelude to a golden age. When it ended, history rolled bloodily onward; the moral quotient of humanity-at-large had not been noticeably elevated. Nor was the Age itself a golden one. Its sages lived, taught, and died in the midst of all the world's usual horror and fury. Their ideas did not automatically trickle down to become property in common. And for the female half of humanity the breakthroughs of the Age were something less than breathtaking. Axial visionaries seemed to share for the most part the male chauvinist assumptions of their cultures and, as Armstrong ruefully notes, there were no female Axial sages.

Nevertheless, the Axial Age was a time of revolutionary proposals in the religious life of humanity. First, it was during this era that human reason first launched its perennial struggle against mythic literalism. Everywhere the old gods and spirits were being interrogated as to their true identity by that strange new breed of human beings—philosophers!—who suddenly appeared in critical mass. Dissatisfaction with unreflective adherence to the old stories was in the air. It was not that *mythos* was being asked to vacate its place in the human mind. As the rationalist Plato himself knew, stories were far too essential for that. But for the first time *logos* was claiming a significant share of humanity's soul and a right to interpret the *mythos* rather than be passively subject to its bewitchments.

Second, the Axial Age sages considered nonviolence a sacred value. Each of the Axial Age faiths, says Armstrong, “began in principled

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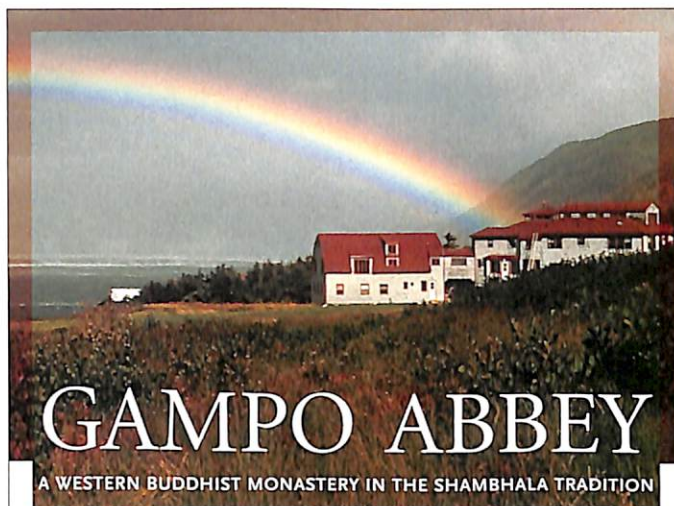
and visceral recoil from the . . . violence of their time.” She identifies the virtue of *ahimsa* (nonviolence) as nothing less than the “indispensable key” to India’s Axial Age. Nevertheless, Armstrong admirably resists making such generalizations into Procrustean beds into which all data are forced to fit. She readily admits anomalies. “In Greece,” she writes, “where violence was institutionalized by the polis, there was ultimately no religious transformation.”

Third, in the Axial Age, religion discovered a new inwardness and yearning for self-transcendence. Axial sages, says Armstrong, expanded the frontiers of human consciousness by discovering a transcendent dimension in the core of their being and making it the object of religious exertions. No longer content to worship the gods in return for protection and sustenance, Axial sages spoke of an inner journey toward a condition limitlessly better than that of ordinary life in the world. They called it salvation or liberation and invited their hearers to exchange the constrictions of the ego-bound life for the infinitely wider expanses of an inner life centered on the divine. This may well have been when systematic practices of interiority were first developed and propagated. Religion, no longer an exclusively cosmological concern, had become psychological.

Fourth, human religiosity, once almost exclusively ritualistic, was now rendered ethical. The Hebrew prophets tirelessly preached that God wanted goodness and justice, not just another burned bull or slaughtered lamb. The yogis of the *Upanishads* scorned the efficacy of the ritual fire sacrifice and recommended instead the inner fire of spiritual discipline to burn away the impurities of egotism and greed. Confucius preached—for the first time in history, claims Armstrong—the Golden Rule.

“The spirituality of self-surrender is at the heart of the Axial ideal,” says Armstrong. In the pre-individual communal mentality of our tribal past there was perhaps no need of this, but the world was different now. The Axial sages univocally encouraged an ethos of sympathy, respect, and universal concern, a disciplined and habitual cultivation of empathy, generosity, and justice. Confucius’ *ren* (benevolence), the Buddha’s *metta* (loving-kindness), Socrates’ *arête* (virtue), and the Hebrew prophets’ mighty rivers of justice and righteousness all bespoke the need for self-criticism and self-transformation. For them, respect for the sacred rights of others *was* religion.

We have never really surpassed the religious insights of the Axial Age and still have far to go in actualizing them. Armstrong clearly hopes that a deeper appreciation of these noble and transformative ideals will help awaken the spiritual revolution she feels is necessary to counterbalance today’s emphasis on technological mastery. In her view, the Axial sages inspire us to reach for the deepest understanding of all that is universally human and to use this knowledge to combat the cultural and nationalistic idolatries that continue to bedevil us. As Hans Küng has said, there can be no peace in the world without peace among the world’s religions, and Armstrong’s work on the Axial Age hastens the day when these great wisdom traditions will be able to recognize their different but equally valid relationships to the ultimate reality that is their source and end. ♦



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