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Karen Armstrong. *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions*.

New York: Anchor Books, 2007

Reviewed by Eric D. Huntsman

Karen Armstrong's *The Great Transformation* is an engaging and highly readable compendium and survey of the great religious and philosophical traditions of India, Israel, Greece, and China that focuses on the period of roughly 900–200 BC. The German philosopher and writer Karl Jaspers first termed this period “The Axial Age,”¹ a title Armstrong adopts in this and her other works about the era because she, like Jaspers, sees it as the axis around which human history pivoted. This age is also important to Latter-day Saint readers because it is the period of the great Hebrew and Book of Mormon prophets. The late Hugh Nibley, for instance, concentrated on this period even before he became familiar with Jaspers's works, noting, “It is not without significance that Lehi counted among his contemporaries not only the greatest first names in science, politics, and business, but also the most illustrious religious founders known to history: Guatama Buddha, Confucius, Lao-tze [Laozi], Vardhaman Mahavira (the founder of Jainism), Zarathustra, and Pythagoras were all of Lehi's day.”²

How strongly Armstrong depends upon Jaspers for both periodization and subject matter becomes apparent in reading this book. While she made allusions to the concept of the Axial Age in many of her previous works, interviews, and lectures, Armstrong reveals her debt to Jaspers by organizing *The Great Transformation* into ten chapters, the first nine of which are chronologically delineated but move synchronically between her four geographical focal points. Armstrong also builds upon Jaspers's basic thesis that Axial civilizations shared certain social and economic conditions that led to intense spiritual introspection and innovation—namely incessant conflicts, political division, and cultures of violence that were paired with both overall prosperity and stark economic stratification.³

However, she adds to this thesis by focusing on the need for selflessness and compassion, and she demonstrates that these virtues were discovered independently in all four regions. Thus, for Armstrong, the important thing about Axial religions and philosophies is that they stressed not so much belief as behavior, and in each instance they produced variants of the Golden Rule (xviii–xix).

Armstrong's facility in working with such disparate traditions and her intense interest in matters of faith and belief are largely the result of her own intriguing life story. Her personal spiritual odyssey—not so much *to* faith but *through* faith—began after a seven-year period in a Roman Catholic convent in Britain. When she left her order in 1969, she was spiritually lost and emotionally damaged but at the cusp of her intellectual life.⁴ After studying at Oxford (she never completed her PhD) and briefly teaching at a girls' school, she began her research into general religious topics with a television assignment to produce a documentary about St. Paul. While in Jerusalem, she encountered not only the roots of Christianity but was also exposed, for the first time really, to Judaism and Islam.⁵ Of this experience she later said:

I began to see that there was much more to monotheism, to the idea of God . . . than I'd thought, despite my religious background. When I began to research my history of God—it was a long period of research that lasted for about three or four years—I began—still began in this skeptical spirit . . . to see that there was a lot in these monotheistic traditions that were really speaking to me, that I could relate to. And in the course of writing and studying, therefore, I came back to a sense of the divine.⁶

This experience sowed the seeds for her densely difficult but nonetheless engaging book *A History of God: The 4000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (1993) and the more readily accessible *Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths* (1996). In both of these works, Armstrong revealed her growing adeptness in moving within and between the three great Abrahamic traditions, leading herself to describe herself as “a freelance monotheist.”⁷ Later fruits of this approach include *The Battle for God: Fundamentalism in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (2000) and biographies of Muhammed (1992) and Buddha (2001). Armstrong's treatment of the Buddha, in fact, signaled a broadening of her interest and expertise beyond the monotheistic faiths, a change that laid the groundwork for *The Great Transformation*.

Armstrong's first chapter, “The Axial Peoples (c. 1600 to 900 BCE),” introduces her readers to the four cultures upon which she centers her book and establishes both Jaspers's basic thesis and her development of it.

Jaspers's historical rubric, perhaps reflecting biases of his day, had ignored the cultural and religious contributions of some earlier traditions, notably those of Egypt and Babylon. Armstrong perpetuates this approach, ignoring the religious, philosophical, and ethical contributions of other cultures (including the monotheism of Akhenaten), although her focus was probably necessary to make the book manageable.

The body of *The Great Transformation* then proceeds to chronicle how the religious and philosophical systems (both grounded in ritual and formalized patterns of behavior) evolved in India, China, Israel, and Greece, and how these systems arrived at relatively common understandings that individual interest and power must give way to concern for the universal good and to selfless compassion. This development is necessary in order for men and women to acquire the “spiritual technology” (275) needed to transcend the mundane struggles of life and achieve inner peace. The following seven chapters bear titles that reflect this evolution: “Ritual (c. 900 to 800 BCE),” “Kenosis (c. 800 to 700 BCE),” “Knowledge (c. 700 to 600 BCE),” “Suffering (c. 600 to 530 BCE),” “Empathy (c. 530 to 450 BCE),” “Concern for Everybody (c. 450 to 398 BCE),” and “All Is One (c. 400 to 300 BCE).” While Armstrong’s general observations about this evolution seem correct, the rhetoric she uses to describe it seems overly influenced by the language of Eastern traditions: as she puts it, “The religious traditions created during the Axial Age in all four regions were rooted in fear and pain. . . . To acknowledge suffering fully was an essential prerequisite for enlightenment” (69).

The penultimate chapter, “Empire (c. 300 to 220 BCE),” witnesses China’s descent into legalism under the Qin dynasty, India’s coming under the sway of the Mauryan Empire, and the Near East falling under the dominion of Alexander the Great and his successors. In this context, the efforts of Laozi in China, the composers of the *Bhagavad-Gita* in India, and the Hellenistic philosophers are seen as rear-guard actions as the Axial Age draws to a close. The messianic piety of the Jews in the intertestamental period, in Armstrong’s view, “had no roots in the Axial Age, and took Judaism in a different, post-Axial direction” (419).

Sometimes, however, the four cultures under discussion do not manifest synchronic development as conveniently as Armstrong seeks. While she recognizes that the great Axial figures—such as Zoroaster in Persia, Buddha in India, and Laozi and Confucius in China—were not actually as contemporaneous as Jaspers had implied (xxiii), her own periodization sometimes reveals itself as artificial when groups do not realize the appropriate stage of development in the period—and chapter—she is discussing. For instance, her discussion of social and economic developments

in seventh-century Greece centers on *kenosis* or “emptying” as the Greeks strive to develop an ethic of selflessness (104). This discussion, however, is in the fourth chapter, “Knowledge (c. 700 to 600 BCE),” whereas this same concept is discussed for India and the Israelites in the previous chapter, appropriately entitled “Kenosis (c. 800 to 700 BCE).” Likewise the Chinese Axial Age is centuries behind the others: while all four cultures begin to discover the transformative power of rituals in the period discussed in her second chapter, “Ritual (c. 900 to 800 BCE),” the Chinese are still concentrating on *li* or rituals in the fourth chapter on knowledge. Only later do they begin to move forward in the direction already taken by the other Axial cultures. Finally, chapter seven, “Concern for Everybody (450–398 BCE),” ironically begins with Israel’s retreat into exclusivity under Nehemiah and Ezra (291–95). In this same chapter, Armstrong’s narrative often digresses into an intellectual and religious chronicle that is interesting and useful to be sure, but which is barely held together by perfunctory references to Axial Age themes.

Armstrong’s skill in moving between and comparing traditions—a manifest strength in *The Great Transformation* and in her other published works—also reveals a certain weakness. She sometimes appears guilty of blurring differences and highlighting similarities. At times she also seems to favor traditions that have been less well-understood in the West in the search for “balance.” By her own admission, she first did this when she took a break from researching *A History of God* to write *Muhammed* in the period following Ayatollah Khomeini’s fatwa against author Salman Rushdie.⁸

Furthermore, there are moments in *The Great Transformation* when barely concealed biases almost smack of a form of religious or philosophical political correctness. The experience of the Greeks in the Axial Age, Armstrong maintains, was scientific and cultural, not religious, and they never abandoned their self-promoting heroic ethos (127). The cosmologies and insights of the natural philosophers of Miletus in the Greek Archaic Age could not be used “therapeutically” because “they had nothing to do with spiritual insight. . . . The Milesians developed their speculations for their own sake” (224–25). According to Armstrong, all Axial peoples were aware of the limitations of the human condition, but while others developed the “spiritual technology” necessary for transcending suffering in life, “the Greeks, it seems, could only see the abyss” (275). While she generally sees the move of the Greeks toward *logos* and reason as having kept them from reaching the spiritual heights of India or China, Armstrong nevertheless does find moments of Hellenic success, including the self-sacrifice of the tragic literary form in “the internalization . . . of ritual that characterized the spirituality of the Axial Age” (268).

Another weakness is Armstrong's tendency to subscribe to and advocate liberal scholarly assumptions when dealing with biblical matters without alerting her readers that these are still only theories. By not articulating for her readers, even briefly, the reasoning behind issues in biblical history and compositional theories, she presents these assumptions as accepted fact, thereby not rising to the kind of scholarly circumspection that one would expect of a writer of her caliber. For instance, in her first chapter on Axial peoples, she presents the "scholarly consensus" on the history of early Israel as arising out of a confederation of local Canaanites and already-in-place Hebrew tribes, dismissing the Exodus story as not having any significant claim to historicity (46–53). Her treatment of the reforms of Josiah, the Deuteronomists, Ezekiel, and the priestly school also reflect many positions popular in much current scholarship, but she reflects on these subjects with little background and discussion (185–216).

The chronological rubric of the Axial Age also excludes, by definition, a full treatment of the origins and development of Christianity, Rabbinic Judaism, and Islam, the subjects of her earlier *A History of God*. To her credit, however, Armstrong deals with these traditions in her stirring final chapter, "The Way Forward," when she describes these movements as building upon the spirit of the Axial Age. Here she pulls together the themes of *The Great Transformation* and ends with an inspiring call for a return to the Axial Age principles of compassion, selflessness, and a desire to avoid inflicting harm as a remedy for many of today's social and religious ills.

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1. Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of Human History* (New Haven: Conn.: Yale University Press, 1953).
2. Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3d ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), xi, 53.
3. Jaspers, 1–6, 14–21.

4. Karen Armstrong, *Through the Narrow Gate: A Memoir of Spiritual Discovery* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981).
5. Karen Armstrong, *The Spiral Staircase: My Climb out of Darkness* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), vii–xx, 170–75, 226–53.
6. Karen Armstrong, interview by Brian Lamb, *Booknotes*, C-Span, September 22, 2000, <http://www.booknotes.org/Transcript/?ProgramID=1636>.
7. Armstrong, interview.
8. Armstrong, *The Spiral Staircase*, 273–83.

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